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By Alpa Pratalia

The neon glow of *Eden*, one of the trendiest nightclubs in the city, pulsed in the humid evening air. The line outside twisted around the corner, filled with young people dressed in their best attempts at effortless elegance. Bouncers, thick-necked and unsmiling, controlled the entrance with a mix of silent judgment and selective nods.

Zoe Carter approached the door with her two best friends, Camila and Priya. The trio moved with the easy confidence of those who never had to wait in line—Camila had secured their entry through an influencer friend, a perk of her 300,000 Instagram followers.

Inside, the club was a sensory overload. Bass-heavy house music reverberated through the cavernous space, vibrating against Zoe's ribcage. Strobe lights flickered over a sea of moving bodies, creating a surreal, fragmented vision of the crowd. The scent of expensive

perfume, sweat, and spilled cocktails filled the air.

Zoe took a careful breath. She wasn't a club person. The noise, the chaos, the alcohol—none of it aligned with her lifestyle. But tonight was different. Camila had insisted. *We need to let loose, babe. Forget work, forget activism, just vibe.* Zoe had relented, but even now, she sipped at her cucumber-mint water, eyeing the scene with a mix of fascination and mild horror.

Camila, already swaying to the beat, pointed toward the VIP section. "That's where the real scene is. Let's get a table."

They wove through the crowd, dodging groups of sweaty men in overpriced shirts and women teetering in heels that screamed *beauty over comfort*. Priya, a law student with an impeccable eye for fashion, led the way with an air of purpose.

As they settled into a booth, a waitress in a sequined dress appeared. "What can I get you ladies?"

Camila ordered a bottle of overpriced champagne—*for the aesthetic*, she claimed. Zoe opted for another water. Priya, the mediator between them, went with a gin and tonic.

"Okay," Camila grinned, flipping her sleek black hair over one shoulder. "Let's manifest a rich, gorgeous man to pay for this bottle."

Zoe rolled her eyes. "Or we could just enjoy the night without turning it into a capitalist transaction."

Camila smirked. "Babe, this *is* capitalism. If a man wants to buy me champagne, I consider it reparations."

They laughed, the tension easing.

Zoe leaned back against the plush leather of the booth, scanning the club with idle curiosity. People moved in a blur of flashing lights, expensive watches, and curated extravagance. *This world is so disconnected from reality*, she thought. Yet, for now, she was here, part of it—at least for one night.

She had no idea that before the night was over, her world would collide with someone from another time entirely.

The club sprawled across multiple floors, each one dedicated to a different soundscape. House on the main floor, funk upstairs, trap booming from a neon-lit mezzanine, and disco glowing somewhere in the back. The music changed as one moved, like stepping between dimensions.

Zoe needed a restroom. Urgently.

She pushed through the dense crowd, navigating the humid press of bodies. Sweat-

slicked arms brushed against her, the air thick with perfume, alcohol, and the faintest hint of something else—vape smoke, maybe, or just the stale exhale of a hundred conversations.

Flashing lights cut through the darkness, blinding her for half-seconds at a time. A DJ screamed something unintelligible over the bass. A group of men—shirts unbuttoned to scandalous degrees—clapped their hands in unison, hyping up a dance circle.

Zoe ignored all of it. Her focus was singular: a sign, a hallway, anything that promised relief.

She spotted a glowing restroom sign near a staircase and made a beeline for it. But as she approached, she realized the line was absurd—at least fifteen women, shifting impatiently in heels, some typing furiously on their phones, others checking their reflections in their front cameras.

No chance. Not with the urgency she felt.

She turned, scanning for alternatives. Somewhere, in the maze of flashing neon and shifting bodies, there had to be another option.

Zoe didn't hesitate. Desperation overrode social etiquette.

Ignoring the protests, she shoved past the waiting women, cutting through the line like a battering ram of urgency. A few grabbed at her arms, indignant—*"Hey! What the hell?"*—but she twisted free, pushing forward.

Another girl, sensing an opening, tried to race her. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second, the unspoken challenge clear.

Zoe lunged.

Her hand smacked against the stall door first. She yanked it open, spun inside, and slammed it shut, flicking the latch into place just as the

other girl banged against it from the outside. *Too slow.*

“Bitch!” came the muffled cry. Zoe didn’t care.

Then—release.

Pure, unfiltered, unholy relief.

The sensation bordered on the obscene. A full-body exhale, the kind that sent shivers down her spine. Somewhere between physical salvation and divine intervention.

"Woohoo!"

The sound was ripped from her throat, involuntary, euphoric.

It echoed beyond the stall, past the line, through the walls—loud enough that, on the other side of the club, a few men standing at the urinals paused midstream and exchanged looks.

Zoe emerged from the stall victorious, standing tall among a sea of scowling women. Insults flew

at her from all directions—*"Unbelievable," "Entitled bitch," "Seriously?!"*—but she beamed like a queen returning from war.

She strutted past the angry line with zero shame, flipping her hair over one shoulder as if she had just closed a million-dollar deal. Her relief had been worth every ounce of social outrage.

Now, the mission was clear: find her friends.

Easier said than done.

The club had morphed into an even greater jungle of bodies, shifting under the ever-changing strobe lights. The music pounded from every direction, the different genres bleeding together in an overwhelming sensory assault.

Zoe scanned the crowd, trying to retrace her steps, but everything looked the same—flashes of neon, glossy lips, men in overpriced shirts, women in heels they regretted.

Camila and Priya had been at their booth, but was it upstairs or on the main floor? She wasn't sure anymore.

Great. Just great.

She pushed forward, weaving through the chaos, dodging a sweaty couple mid-makeout and side-stepping a guy who was clearly about to vomit.

Somewhere in this mess, her friends were waiting. She just had to find them.

Zoe took a wrong turn.

Or, more accurately, a heavy velvet drape took her hostage.

She hadn't even seen it coming, just felt the thick, luxurious fabric suddenly envelop her as she tried to push past what she thought was an opening. Instead of slipping through, she

twisted into it—wrapped, tangled, struggling like a fly in a web.

The more she fought, the worse it got.

The drape spun her, coiling around her limbs, suffocating her in its absurd theatrical embrace. She yanked, pulled, kicked—at one point, she might have bitten it—but nothing worked. It was her and the drape now, locked in an existential battle, a full-blown *Looney Tunes* scene playing out in the shadows of the club.

And then—suddenly—she broke free.

She stumbled forward, expecting to land back in the neon-lit chaos of *Eden*.

But she didn't.

The air was different. Cooler. Smoother. The noise of bass-heavy house music had vanished, replaced by something strange, something... grandpa-like.

Dim, golden light bathed the polished wood floors. A mahogany bar stretched elegantly before her, manned by a bartender in a crisp white shirt and bowtie, polishing a glass with slow, practiced care. The scent in the air wasn't sweat and spilled vodka but something richer—whiskey, cigar smoke, old money.

On a small stage, under the soft glow of a vintage spotlight, stood a man at a microphone. He wasn't rapping. He wasn't screaming into autotune. He was... was he *singing*?

No, not singing—*crooning*.

A deep, velvety voice glided over the room, thick with emotion, effortless in its control. The kind of voice that belonged to a man who had *lived*, who had *loved*, who had possibly lost a war or two and still looked good in a tux.

Zoe blinked.

What the actual avocado toast was this?

Zoe's brain short-circuited for a second.

At the bar, perched with unsettling stillness, sat a *boy*—no, a *man*? Something in between? He looked young, but his posture, his clothes, his entire aura screamed *old*.

Not old as in age, but old as in *out of time*.

He was dressed in a **double-breasted tuxedo**, tailored so perfectly it looked like it had materialized onto his body rather than been put on. A pocket square. Cufflinks. Hair slicked back with a precision that defied humidity. The dim lighting cast sharp, clean shadows across his cheekbones, making him look less like a person and more like a wax statue someone had forgotten in the corner of a 1950s movie set.

And he was **sipping something transparent** from a delicate glass with a **long stem and a weirdly triangular bowl**.

Zoe squinted.

A… *martini*?

She only recognized it from TV. Nobody actually drank those anymore, right? Maybe influencers for aesthetic purposes, but this guy? He was drinking it like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Her phone vibrated. She ignored it.

Somewhere in the background, the crooner finished his song. Soft applause rippled through the room—actual **applause**, like this was a jazz club in 1956 and not the chaotic nightlife jungle she had entered.

Zoe felt her feet root to the floor.

She had stepped into another world.

The **boy…? man…?** turned his head in her direction.

His movements were slow, deliberate—like he had all the time in the world, like he *owned* time

itself. His gaze landed on her, sharp and assessing, yet completely at ease.

Then, he **smiled**.

Not a casual, modern smile. Not a lopsided grin or a quick, dismissive nod.

A *real* smile.

The kind that belonged to an era where men tipped their hats and lit women's cigarettes with a flick of a silver lighter. A smile practiced in smoky mirrors, refined over countless evenings of whiskey and whispered conversations.

He raised his **martini glass** to her in a small, effortless toast.

Zoe just stared.

She was still recalibrating reality when the **bartender in the bowtie** turned to her with a smooth, professional smile—warm but impersonal, the kind of smile that had been

serving drinks long before she was born. With a subtle, knowing gesture, he **indicated a stool** next to the tuxedoed figure.

An unspoken invitation.

Her phone buzzed again. Somewhere, in another world, her friends were looking for her.

But in this one?

The choice was hers.

Zoe **went**.

Her **hemp moccasins** betrayed her immediately. The polished floor was too smooth, too elegant for her eco-conscious, non-leather footwear. She felt herself **slipping**, catching her balance at the last second, but the movement was enough to make her hyper-aware of how **wrong** she looked in this setting.

She should have worn something that made a **clink** sound—heels, hard-soled loafers,

something that announced presence instead of whispering discomfort.

Still, she reached the stool and sat.

Up close, the boy—yes, boy now, not man—looked her age. Maybe twenty, twenty-one at most. He had the polished elegance of someone older, but his face, his eyes, the way he held himself—it all suggested youth wrapped in an outdated package.

The boy smiled again, an expression crafted for dimly lit bars and slow jazz.

"Let me buy you a drink."

Zoe hesitated.

The bartender stood poised, ready, expectant—like he already knew what she would say. The air smelled of aged liquor, wood polish, and a time that was *not* hers.

She felt, for the first time in her life, **completely out of her depth**.

The **boy frowned** at her question, as if she had just asked what color the sky was.

Then, with an easy, wordless motion, he **pushed his drink toward her**.

Zoe hesitated for a fraction of a second—just a fraction—before picking it up.

It was **ice-cold** in her hands, the condensation slick against her fingers. She hadn't realized how **thirsty** she was.

She took a **good gulp**.

And **choked**.

Holy. **Mother. Of. Kale. Smoothies.**

This was **not** cucumber water.

It was **fire in liquid form**, slicing down her throat, scorching everything in its path. Her

body **revolted** instantly. Coughing, wheezing, gasping for air—she was sure she had **inhaled a full lung of gasoline**.

She **hacked and coughed**, expecting to **lose a lung** onto the polished bar counter.

Her eyes watered.

Her throat burned.

She could already feel her **soul leaving her body**.

Then, she looked up.

Neither the **boy** nor the **bartender** were **laughing**.

Amused? **Yes.**

Worried? **Not at all.**

Their expressions carried the distinct air of **expectancy**—as if this moment was **normal**.

Not in a patronizing, mocking way. More like they had **seen this before**.

And then, a **strange realization** hit her.

They weren't looking at her as a **person** in distress.

They were looking at her as a **girl**.

The distinction wasn't **condescending**, exactly—it was just... there. A quiet understanding, a ritual moment. **A girl, taking her first real drink.**

Her pride **snapped back into place**.

She straightened. **Wiped the sweat off her brow.**

Her throat was still **on fire**, but she inhaled sharply, forced down the lingering cough, and **stood her ground**.

Then, in a **still raspy, battle-scarred voice**, she nodded at the bartender and declared:

"Yes, I'll have one of those."

"Name's Velluti. Lorenzo Velluti."

The **boy—man—whatever** stated it with a confidence that made the name sound like it should have been engraved on gold-plated cigarette cases and whispered in hushed tones at exclusive gatherings.

Then, without breaking eye contact, he **downed the rest of his martini** in one smooth motion.

Not a wince. Not a grimace. Not a single twitch of resistance.

Zoe barely had time to process that before he casually turned to the bartender.

"Make two of those, Ralph."

She blinked. **Ralph?**

Her brain short-circuited.

"Not dude? Not my man? Not Scorpion? Ralph? Who the hell was still named Ralph?"

She looked at the bartender, expecting—what, a reaction? A correction? Maybe a snarky remark?

Nothing.

Ralph, apparently a fully functional, existing person in this **pocket of time-warped elegance**, merely nodded with the professionalism of someone who had been **Ralph-ing** his way through **decades** of such interactions.

Zoe exhaled slowly, trying to **recalibrate reality**.

She was still standing, her throat still **raw from the martini ambush**, and yet, something about this **exchange**—this entire setting—felt **too composed, too practiced, too untouched by the modern world**.

Lorenzo **Velluti**? A **Ralph** who wasn't a pizza guy or an ironic Instagram handle?

What the actual **compostable cutlery** was happening here?

He produced a cigarette case.

From his **internal pocket**.

Really?

Like… **exactly** what she had **just joked** about in her mind?

But—it wasn't **gold-plated**.

No, that would have been **vulgar**.

Zoe didn't know **how** she knew, but she knew.

It was **platinum**.

Not chrome, not silver. **Solid, heavy, stupidly expensive platinum.**

The kind of object that wasn't **flashy**, wasn't trying to **prove anything**—because **wealth that real didn't need to be loud**.

She caught herself **staring** as he flipped it open with a casual, practiced motion. Inside, cigarettes were **neatly arranged** like a work of art, paper-white and perfect.

He tilted the case **slightly toward her**, a wordless offer.

Zoe raised a **kind hand** in polite refusal, still **struggling to make her throat function** after the **martini assassination attempt**.

Lorenzo **nodded**, as if her answer had been the most natural thing in the world. Not disappointed, not surprised—just accepting.

Then, with an effortless flick, he plucked one for himself, closing the case with a soft, metallic *click*.

Zoe exhaled slowly, still **trying to catch up** to the reality unfolding before her.

"Zoe," she whispered, her voice still raw, still fighting the martini-inflicted damage.

Lorenzo repeated it, letting the name roll off his tongue like he was tasting it, like it was something rare.

"Zoe. I don't believe my luck."

Zoe blinked.

Was that… flirting?

Not the TikTok-era flirting she was used to—no playful teasing, no ironic self-awareness, no overuse of emojis.

This was something else, something slower, smoother, completely devoid of the usual self-deprecating humor that softened modern attraction.

He had said it like he meant it.

Like her presence alone was some kind of unexpected, delightful surprise.

She wasn’t sure how to react to that.

Ralph set down the two martinis with the kind of **silent precision** that suggested he had done this exact ritual **a thousand times before**.

And then—without a word—he placed a **tall glass of iced water** in front of Zoe.

No comment.

Just a **knowing smile**, as if he had long since accepted the natural order of things: girls who weren't ready for martinis, and men who ordered them anyway.

Lorenzo didn’t touch his drink.

He simply **waited**.

Zoe took the **water first**, **washing down as much ice-cold salvation** as her body could handle before the inevitable **brain freeze** hit.

She exhaled. **Better.**

Then, finally, she reached for the **martini glass**.

Lorenzo followed suit, lifting his, **raising it toward her in a toast—but not clinking.** Just a quiet acknowledgment.

She mimicked the movement and took a sip.

Holy. Mother. Of. Kale.

The gasoline taste came **rushing back**, slicing through the cold, through the water, through her entire **existence**.

Her lips barely **touched** the liquid before the memory hit: the **burn**, the **raw intensity**, the **chemical violence**.

She suddenly thought of **her father's company**, the oil giants, the **fuel they sold to the world**—and how **this**?

This felt **just as lethal**.

She swallowed. Barely.

What are these people doing to themselves?

"Do you come here often, Zoe?"

She froze.

Cleared her throat.

What?

Here? In this... what even was this place?

Where the quinoa was she?

Her eyes darted around—the polished mahogany, the bowtie-clad bartender, the gentle hum of conversation, the crooner now starting another slow, syrupy tune.

This wasn't a club.

This wasn't a speakeasy.

This was—

She didn't know what this was.

So she mumbled, "No, not really."

Because what else could she say?

No, actually, I just came from a world where people drink espresso martinis and tequila shots while screaming over EDM, and now I'm here in some parallel universe where men in tuxedos drink gasoline in platinum cups and act like time stopped in 1956?

Yeah. No.

She just **sipped her martini**, hoping it would burn away the confusion.

"You're in luck. Tony's up next."

Zoe's brain auto-filled.

Tony?

Tony Plaza?

Was he *trapping* here? In **this** place?

Oh, that she would **love** to see.

But instead—

A man in a flawless suit stepped onto the small stage.

Italian-American by every possible definition, his dark hair slicked back with the kind of effortlessness that only came from either great genetics or a lifetime of practice. His features were sharp, his aquiline nose significant, his presence demanding attention before he even opened his mouth.

He nodded at the jazz trio, then turned to the audience with a slight bow.

And then—

He started singing.

Not rapping.

Not hyping.

Crooning.

A slow, melodic, strangely fascinating song about—

Wait.

Was he singing about… **San Francisco?**

About leaving his **heart** there?

And **cable cars climbing halfway to the sky?**

Zoe stared.

She had no **idea what was happening anymore**.

That man **sang**.

No—**not sang**.

He **pronounced jazz**.

And somehow, Zoe **knew** it was jazz.

How? She had never **listened** to jazz. That was a **grandpa's thing**, something **boomer-core**, something old people droned on about when they wanted to sound cultured.

But now—watching, hearing, **feeling**—

The man on stage didn't just **sing** the song.

He **spoke notes**.

His voice shifted—**a trumpet**, bright and brassy. Then **a saxophone**, smooth and sultry. Then **a clarinet**, fluttering through delicate, weightless tones.

She sat, hypnotized, the martini glass frozen in her fingers.

Was this—

Was this what **old people** insisted on calling **music**?

Then **Lorenzo put a hand on her thigh**.

Just like that.

Zoe's brain **short-circuited**.

What?

What was that?

What kind of **womanizing macho trash** was this?

Her first instinct—**yank his hand away**.

But—

Then he **squeezed**.

Softly.

Not possessive. Not demanding. Just... **present**.

And it sent a jolt—not of anger, not of disgust—something **else**.

Something that made her **blush**.

Oh my yoga, she thought. **Am I blushing?**

She turned to him, ready to—**to what, exactly?**—but before she could even form a response, he spoke.

"How?"

She blinked. **"How…"** she echoed, confused, her brain still catching up.

His eyes were fixed on her, searching, **intense but not intrusive.**

"How can you be so perfect?" he asked, voice quiet but firm. *Certain.*

"So··· exact?"

His fingers still rested lightly on her thigh, but the weight of his words pressed heavier.

"For this place. This moment. This music··· this complete moment?"

Zoe inhaled sharply.

Because—

Because **what was she supposed to say to that?**

"May I pour you a drink at my place?"

Zoe's brain **froze.**

May you what?

Pour?

Like in **chem lab**?

A **drink**?

Like a **mango infusion**?

Her **eyebrows twitched**.

What was this **place**?

This **parallel universe** where men **crooned** instead of shouted, where bartenders were **named Ralph**, where a boy—no, a **man**—wore a **double-breasted tuxedo** and spoke in **fully-formed sentences without emojis**?

She glanced around.

The **mahogany bar**, the **dim lights**, the **way time felt slower here**, like the modern world **had never quite reached this pocket of existence**.

And now, this **Lorenzo Velluti**, this **living anachronism**, was inviting her **somewhere else**.

She should say **no**.

She should get up, find her friends, **escape back to reality**.

But the martini still burned on her lips.

And the music still **buzzed through her veins**.

She **tried to shield herself**.

"Maybe you shouldn't drive after two of... these…" she said, gesturing toward the **martini glass**, still feeling the lingering **burn** of her own sip.

A perfectly reasonable **exit route**. A modern, responsible, unimpeachable excuse.

But Lorenzo just **smiled**.

That same **unbothered, smooth, infuriatingly composed** smile.

"Who said anything about driving?"

Zoe felt a **strange chill** down her spine.

Not fear.

Something else.

A realization that, once again, she was dealing with a **completely different set of rules**.

"I didn't see you Ubering."

Lorenzo **tilted his head**, almost as if he had to **translate** the word in his mind before reacting.

Then, with a mix of **amusement and mild offense**, he exhaled:

"Ubering? Please."

Like the mere thought was beneath **discussion**.

Then, without even looking away from her, he spoke:

"Ralph, have the car, please."

"Sure thing, Mr. Velluti."

Zoe **blinked**.

Her **brain shattered into a thousand kale-infused pieces**.

Dear mother of kale.

What **white rabbit** had she followed?

He **moved his hand** from her thigh to her **hand**.

A seamless transition. Smooth. Natural. **Like it belonged there.**

Then—he **stood up**.

And… **helped her up**?

Whaaat?

Zoe had **never**—literally **never**—been **helped up** before.

She wasn't a Victorian lady exiting a carriage. She wasn't **fragile**. She wasn't—

And yet.

And **yet**.

She found herself **standing**, her hand still lightly in his, as he **accompanied her through the bar**, past the mahogany, past the quiet hum of jazz, past **Ralph** (who gave a single, professional nod) and toward the **door**.

Wait.

So…

She was **going to his place now**?

The realization hit her just as they stepped into the cool night air.

She turned to him, a **half-laugh, half-genuine confusion** bubbling up.

"So… am I going to your place now?"

Lorenzo, still composed, still impossibly **in control of reality itself**, glanced at her.

"As you asked."

What?

I never—

She opened her mouth.

Stopped.

Because.

Wait.

Had she?

She never—she *never*—

What?

Before Zoe even realized it, they were outside.

The door had been opened for her—by someone else.

A real taxi waited at the curb.

Not an Uber. Not a ride-share. Not some guy named Kyle in a Prius blasting bad EDM.

A yellow car.

With real leather seats.

And—

She blinked.

A **bar boy**—no, a **young man**—**holding the door open**.

She caught a glimpse of his crisp **white jacket**, his perfectly **poised stance**—professional, effortless. He wasn't some nightclub bouncer, wasn't some underpaid intern moonlighting as a valet.

And then—

The **details clicked together.**

His skin—**Black**.

His uniform—**immaculate**.

The **entire scene**—wrong.

What year is this?

How did I get into this car?

Zoe wasn't sure.

One moment, she was **blinking at reality**, trying to piece it together, and the next—

She was **inside**.

The **leather seats** were **real**—too soft, too perfectly aged to be synthetic.

The **bar boy**—why was he **so young**? Why was this scene **so shamelessly racist**—this perfectly **polished** young Black man in a **white jacket** holding doors like a **scene from a movie that should have never been made?**

Her stomach twisted.

She turned to **Lorenzo**, ready to—**to what, exactly?**—but then, with perfect ease, he leaned back against the leather and said:

"They call me Loris."

Like that **meant something**.

Like that **explained anything**.

Then, as if he hadn't just **dropped her into a different timeline**, he turned to her with **sincere interest** and asked:

"What are your favorite reads?"

Zoe stared.

What—

What?

He smiled.

Not in a smug way. Not like he was testing her. Just... genuinely, as if the conversation mattered.

Reads? Like… books?

Zoe was **well-read**, of course. She had always **considered herself literary**, someone who could hold her own in intellectual circles. But—

But **favorite**?

That was **intimate. Defining.**

Her mind scrambled. She needed something **respectable**, something that wouldn't make her sound like she only read articles, e-books, and whatever was trending on BookTok.

"Russians, I guess," she improvised.

Lorenzo—no, **Loris**—smiled wider, almost **pleased.**

"Oh, *Taras Bulba* is great, isn't it?"

Zoe almost **laughed in relief.**

It was great.

The battles, the father and sons, the brutal **sacrifice**—she had read it in a college lit class and had been **mesmerized** by the rawness of it.

So she said so.

Loris nodded, swirling the last of his martini in its glass. **"That moment when Andriy sees his**

love in the besieged city… and makes his choice?" He shook his head, as if he felt it, truly felt it. "Devastating. And yet—what else could he have done?"

Zoe blinked.

Was she really talking Gogol in a leather-seated time-traveling taxi with a tuxedo-clad enigma who called himself Loris?

The taxi stopped.

Before Zoe could even process it, Loris had already gotten out, moved around the car, and—

Opened her door.

Offered his hand.

What now?

Should she bite it?

Some feral, irrational part of her considered it, just to see if he would flinch.

Instead, she **reached out**.

And **touched.**

His **hand**—warm, steady—**helped her out of the car.**

Then, without hesitation, it guided her:

Through a **building door**.

Through an **elevator**, rising smoothly, humming softly.

Through an **apartment door**.

And onto—

A **sofa**.

A **large** sofa.

No—**very large**.

So **large** that she couldn't immediately tell **where it ended**.

The yellow leather stretched out like a horizon, absurdly luxurious, absurdly impractical, absurdly Loris.

Then, he asked:

"What is your poison?"

Zoe blinked.

Her poison?

This was not a kombucha kind of question.

He approached a cabinet, one that looked like furniture but wasn't—not really.

When he opened it, Zoe realized it was well-stocked.

Not with snacks. Not with anything familiar.

With bottles.

Glass, some smooth and modern, others antique-looking, labels either minimalist or extravagant, but all radiating a sense of quality.

Were those… **liquors?**

They looked like the ones **behind Ralph at the bar**, but somehow… **better**. More **deliberate**. More **selective**.

She was still processing when Loris, without looking back, repeated his question:

"Your poison?"

Zoe hesitated.

A **coconut-cucumber water**, maybe?

Something **hydrating**, **detoxing**, **safe**?

But before she could answer, Loris, still scanning the bottles, smirked.

"Vodka tonic it is."

Zoe **exhaled sharply**.

So that's **how this worked, huh?**

Loris handed her a **light-colored high glass**—something **tall, elegant**, filled with clear liquid, ice clinking gently inside.

(For those who **knew**, it was a **highball**.)

For himself, a **low glass**, shorter, heavier, with a **deep amber liquid** that caught the dim apartment light just right.

(For those who **knew**, it was a **tumbler**.)

He took a slow sip, then—**casually, like he was asking her to breathe**—said:

"Take off your shoes."

Zoe's **brain screamed NO.**

Her **feet were not ready for this.**

Her **eco-conscious, hemp-based, responsibly-sourced moccasins** had been working **overtime** keeping the city's grime away from her **socks** (or worse, her **bare feet**).

But Loris just looked at her, expectant, unbothered.

She stalled.

"Have you read Hemingway?" he asked, like this was a logical next step.

Zoe snorted. "Who, the chauvinist macho claimer with obviously an impotency thing and over-compensating?"

Then, after a beat, she sighed and admitted:

"Yes. I have."

Loris took a slow sip of his tumbler, eyes focused somewhere in the middle distance, as if recalling a conversation from another lifetime.

"The way Robert Wilson figures out the couple dynamics, gets his part, but finally gets out of it... masterful."

Zoe froze mid-sip.

Damn him.

Damn this chauvinist male guy who dragged her here.

Because—

Because **he was right.**

That was **masterful literature**.

And she hated that she **agreed**.

He touched her ankle.

Not in a **casual, careless way**—but in a way that felt **deliberate, weighted**, like he knew that an **ankle** wasn't just an ankle.

Because an **ankle costs you suffering.**

Because an **ankle is a sign.**

Because an **ankle has secrets that it keeps to itself.**

His fingers **brushed against it**, barely there, and yet—Zoe felt it like an **undercurrent** through the room, through the moment, through whatever **strange, uncharted territory** she had just stepped into.

The **cognac in his glass was good**, even if **Martell was not.**

And she—**she didn't know what to do with the fact that she hadn't pulled away.**

No… she was not getting—

No.

No.

Zoe's **own brain** cut her off, **slamming the brakes** before her body could misinterpret anything.

This was **not happening**.

This **chiseled, tuxedo-wearing anachronism**, this **overgrown lost boy**, this **walking gender**

stereotype in platinum and leather, was **not** going to pull her into some ridiculous, outdated **macho fantasy**.

Her **pussy**?

No, ma'am.

Zoe **internally grabbed** her own libido by the collar and **shook it.**

"No, pussy. You are drying out right now."

Not just drying—**evaporating**.

This chauvinistic, macho, useless, flaccid-penis sorry excuse?

He wasn't **winning.**

She was **not falling** into whatever **black-and-white film noir nonsense** he thought he was staging.

She was **getting out.**

Now.

Her hand was already moving—**phone out, Uber app open, no hesitation, no second thoughts.**

She was **leaving.**

And she was **calling the Uber.**

Now.

Then he passed his thumb over her foot arch.

A slow, deliberate motion.

Zoe's **entire body locked up**.

Because—

Because **what the actual kale smoothie was this?**

Her **pussy**—the one she had just **commanded to shut down, to dry out, to reject this entire scenario with feminist fury—**

Did the **opposite.**

Full waterfall.

Instant. Uncontrollable. **Betrayal.**

She felt the **heat** spread between her thighs, felt the **wet fabric** pressing against her skin, felt—

No. No. NO.

He is toxic.

A **macho, outdated, overconfident relic of the past.**

A **walking gender cliché wrapped in a double-breasted tuxedo.**

A **man who thinks women should sip martinis and read Hemingway and take off their shoes just because he tells them to.**

No.

But—

But her body **wasn't listening.**

He took off her hemp shoe.

Then her **hemp sock.**

And—

Oh. No.

The **cloud** that escaped **was not a pleasant one.**

Zoe felt a **wave of horror** crash over her.

Violated.

Not because of **his touch**, but because of **this exposure**, this **raw unveiling** of something so **intensely personal, so unfiltered, so her.**

Her **smell.**

Her **body.**

Her **real, imperfect, human existence.**

She wanted to **throw this leg away.**

To **detach it, toss it, incinerate it.**

To **escape this moment entirely.**

But instead—

Instead.

He **passed his thumb over her foot arch.**

And—

And—

Oh.

Her **pussy betrayed her.**

Again.

No, not just **betrayed**.

Went full waterfall.

A **flash flood. A monsoon. A whole goddamn ecosystem shift.**

She **felt it**, the wet fabric **clinging**, the unmistakable **heat pooling** between her thighs.

What.

What **was this?**

No.

No.

No, no, no, no, no.

He is toxic.

A macho. A walking red flag. A patriarchal fever dream.

This—this should not be happening.

And yet.

Her body wasn't listening.

He stood.

Then—knelt by her.

Close. Too close.

His hands found the collar of her bamboo fiber shirt, fingers curling around the fabric, pulling her back to him.

Not gently. Not asking.

And then—

Then he kissed her.

Violently.

Not soft, not tentative. **A collision. A clash.**

And she—

She let him?

Her **lips pressed back against his**, the force of it **almost painful**—but **still**, still, her mouth **searched**—

For his **tongue?**

What?

No.

No. No. No.

This was **wrong**.

He was **wrong.**

This was **toxic, outdated, patriarchal, alpha-male garbage.**

And yet—

Her **body didn't stop.**

He shoved her up.

Not harshly—**but fully.**

Into his **arms**, with a strength that felt **effortless, practiced**, like she **weighed nothing** in his world.

Then—**he walked.**

Carried her.

Put her **on the bed.**

Gently.

Not **soft**, not **hesitant**, just··· with **intention**. Like this was already **decided**, like she had already **chosen**, like there was **no need to question it.**

And then—

Then he **started taking off his clothes.**

His **jacket first**, sliding off with slow precision.

His **tie next**, loosened with a flick of his fingers.

His **shirt—**

And—

Why was she taking off hers?

No.

No. No. No.

She hadn't even **shaved**.

She wasn't **prepared**.

Her body was **wrong**, her skin was **wrong**, her mind was **screaming**, and—

No way.

No way she was so wet.

No way she was ripping her own clothes off.

And yet—

Here she was.

He lifted her legs, gently but firmly, placing her **ankles around his neck** with the kind of confidence that left no room for hesitation.

Zoe **gasped**, the sensation catching her completely off-guard.

Her body **reacted** before her mind could stop it, an uncontrollable shiver running down her spine.

And then—

She felt it.

The undeniable, overwhelming **truth** she didn't want to face.

She… **wanted it.**

Not just wanted—**craved.**

Somehow, in this surreal, chaotic moment, her body was no longer hers. It was his—or maybe it was both of theirs, tangled in a primal, wordless understanding.

And then she heard her own voice, soft but undeniable:

Begging.

Begging for him.

Why?

Why was she **giving in** to this toxic, alpha-male, macho fantasy she had sworn to reject?

Her mind rebelled, but her body whispered the answer she didn't want to hear.

He moved with a rhythm that felt **intuitive**, as if he had studied her without needing words, without needing explanations.

He **gave her pleasure**, pulling her body into sensations that seemed to rise from nowhere and **consume her entirely**.

She gasped, shivered, **arched into him**.

And then—

He **took it for himself.**

A shift, a command of the moment, his body claiming hers in a way that was unapologetic, primal. She felt the weight of it, the certainty, the way he **knew exactly what he was doing.**

And then—

He gave it back.

More intense, more overwhelming, more… everything.

Her body surrendered again, her mind flickering somewhere between protest and acceptance, caught in the storm of what he was making her feel.

This was a cycle she couldn't stop, couldn't fight, couldn't want to stop fighting.

She **lay on the bed**, gasping for air, her body still **trembling** from what had just happened.

What had that been?

Not just sex. Not just pleasure.

Something **beyond.**

Loris had made her **come beyond reality**, unraveling her in ways she didn't even know were **possible**.

Then—he had **taken his pleasure**, thrust into her with a force that should have **broken her**, should have **shattered her**—but instead, it had sent her **spiraling deeper** into something she couldn't name.

And then—

Then he had made her **cum above galaxies.**

Not just **a second time.** Not just **more.**

Beyond.

Her mind floated somewhere in space, **disconnected, rewired, undone**.

Her breath was still **ragged**, her limbs still **weak**, and her brain?

Her brain just kept repeating—

What… what?

Then, **he laid beside her.**

Silent. Unrushed. As if the universe had no choice but to move **at his pace.**

And then—**again**—he produced the **platinum cigarette case.**

Like it was part of **his ritual.**

Like this moment **wasn't complete without it.**

He took one for himself.

Zoe had **never smoked** in her life.

She **hated** smoking. The **toxins, the smell, the politics** of it—everything about it was **against her principles.**

But—

She **needed one.**

She reached. Took it between her fingers.

He didn't react, just smoothly flicked open a **lighter.**

Platinum.

Because of course it was.

And—

Was that a **diamond** in the hinge?

Zoe had no time to process it before he brought the flame to her lips.

She inhaled.

Smoke filled her lungs.

She coughed.

He smirked.

And for some reason, **she didn't care.**

"A penny for your secrets," he said, voice smooth, patient.

And Zoe—

Zoe spilled the beans.

Everything.

The martinis had loosened her tongue, the sex had shattered her completely, and now, in the quiet, dim-lit aftermath, she poured herself out.

She talked, unraveling pieces of herself she hadn't even realized she had been keeping in.

Maybe it was the way he listened—not just hearing, but absorbing, like every word she spoke mattered.

Maybe it was because her body still hummed from him, from what they had done.

Or maybe it was just exhaustion.

Either way—she **kept talking** until, somewhere in the middle of a sentence, her words **faded into sleep.**

And then—

He kissed her.

Not on the lips.

Not with hunger.

But on the **forehead.**

Soft. **Uncalculated.** Almost **absentminded.**

Then—he **held her still.**

His arms **tightened around her**, keeping her there, against him, as if **securing something fragile.**

And **inside his own mind**, a thought flickered—one he should have **crushed immediately.**

Loris, what are you doing?

Getting fond of someone?

As Zoe **woke up**, the first thing she felt was **warmth.**

Not just the **heat of the sheets**, but of **him.**

Loris.

His body was **pressed against hers**, solid, present, **undeniably real.**

And—

He was **smoking a cigarette.**

The scent of it mixed with the lingering traces of **sex, sweat, and something unmistakably him.**

She blinked, her brain still caught between **dream and waking.**

Then—**as if sensing her stirring**—he turned slightly, the cigarette between his fingers, and **offered it to her.**

Like it was the **most natural thing in the world.**

And because—

Because in this **absurd dream**, in this **time-warped, inexplicable reality**—

That's just what you do.

She took it.

Inhaled.

The smoke burned down her throat, raw and unfamiliar.

She exhaled slowly, the nicotine swirling into the air—into the morning—into **whatever the hell this was.**

"Breakfast?" he asked, his voice smooth and unhurried.

Zoe **clapped her hands**, still caught in the haze of sleep, nicotine, and whatever alternate reality she had stumbled into.

"Breakfast!"

Loris gave a small smile and disappeared into the **kitchen**.

She sat up slowly, her body still heavy, her mind catching up. But then—

What was that smell?

That **wasn't avocado toast**.

Or chia pudding.

Or a **quinoa-kale smoothie bowl.**

That was… **frying?**

When he returned, he set the plate in front of her with the casual confidence of someone who had been **serving breakfasts like this his entire life.**

Eggs, sunny side up.

Crispy bacon.

White bread, lightly toasted.

And—

Black coffee.

No oat milk. No almond foam. Just **coffee.**

Zoe stared at the plate, half horrified, half intrigued.

"This is··· breakfast?" she muttered, as if looking at some alien artifact.

Loris sat across from her, smirking.

"The only breakfast," he replied.

"Not home-cooked enough?" he joked, watching her hesitation.

Then, without a second thought, without even **acknowledging** that it might be unusual, he reached for a bottle.

And **spiked his coffee with bourbon.**

In the morning.

Zoe **blinked.**

Because of **course he did.**

Of **course** the man who smoked cigarettes in bed and wore a tuxedo unironically would pour **straight bourbon into his coffee at breakfast**.

She glanced down at her **black coffee**, still bitter, still untouched.

Was this another **test?**

Was she supposed to **follow suit?**

Or was this just—**him?**

She **spotted** a **Tabasco bottle** sitting innocently on the table.

And—out of **pure trooping up**, out of some **primal instinct to match his absurdity with her own**—she grabbed it.

And **showered her plate.**

Like, **you spike your coffee? Fine. I'll sauce my plate.**

A **silent challenge.** A **counter-move.**

But then—

As the **red liquid soaked into the eggs, the bacon, the white bread**—

Holy quinoa.

Now I have to eat this.

Her brain caught up **too late.**

And before she could even **recover**, before she could think of a **way out**—

Loris, with the **same casual lawlessness**, reached across the table.

And, **without asking, without hesitation—**

spiked her coffee too.

Bourbon.

Straight in.

No discussion.

No questions.

Just **this.**

She had **never** had fried eggs before.

Not like **this**.

The **firm white** with its slightly crisped edges? **Suspicious.**

The **runny orange part**, shimmering, threatening to spill? **Downright alarming.**

And the **fried brown thing** beside it? **Yak.**

She hesitated, staring at the plate as if it might **bite her first.**

But—

But she had **trooped up** with the Tabasco.

She had **accepted the bourbon-spiked coffee.**

She couldn't **back down now.**

So, with the **determination of a warrior facing an unknown enemy**, she took her fork—

And **tried.**

The **first bite** hit her **confused palate** like an unexpected plot twist.

The **crispy saltiness** of the bacon, the **richness** of the egg, the **sharp heat** of the Tabasco—

It was **wrong.**

It was **primitive.**

It was **delicious.**

She chewed slowly, her brain **fighting itself.**

And across the table, Loris **watched**, sipping his **bourbon coffee**, smirking like he had already **known the outcome.**

No.

No. No. No.

Macho man.

Who treats me like a princess—but a princess in a fairy tale I never asked for.

Who makes me almost puke with his martini gasoline.

Who makes me feel like an object, something to be held, to be unwrapped, to be consumed.

Who then—damn him—gives me unforgettable orgasms.

Who feeds me meat, serves me this wrong, primitive, unethical, patriarchal, planet-destroying delicious breakfast.

No.

No way this was happening.

No **way** she was still **here**, still **eating this**, still **letting herself be part of this ridiculous, time-warped, black-and-white-film reality.**

And yet—

She swallowed another bite.

Loris leaned back in his chair, finishing the last sip of his **bourbon-laced coffee**, and glanced at her with that same effortless, **completely unbothered** demeanor.

"I have meetings in the morning."

Meetings.

Of course he had **meetings.**

What kind of **meetings** did someone like **him** even have? Meetings where people smoked indoors? Where briefcases had **actual documents** instead of laptops? Where someone named **Giovanni** poured brandy at 10 AM while discussing **"business"?**

She was still **processing** when he added, smoothly:

"Spoil yourself."

And just like that, he stood, stretching, utterly at ease in his **half-unbuttoned tuxedo shirt**, as if **last night, this morning, all of it—was simply the way things were meant to be.**

Zoe sat there, still clutching her **highball of now-bourbon-infused coffee**, staring at her **plate of betrayal**, and thought:

Spoil myself?

What even counts as spoiling in this absurd dream?

"You have meetings?"

Zoe's brain snapped into **fight mode**, the residual **bourbon, Tabasco, and post-orgasm existential crisis** all fusing into one chaotic response.

"I have meetings, you piece of macho shit."

She straightened in her chair, eyes locked on Loris as if daring him to challenge her reality.

I have...

...meetings.

(She had never had a meeting in her entire life.)

I have... your meetings.

Yes. That sounded right.

Because—of course she had his meetings.

Because she represented him legally.

(She studied architecture.)

But—who cares?

She grabbed her coffee, still laced with alcohol and bad decisions, and raised it to her lips.

"Wait until I drink my... alcoholic coffee..."

She took a **slow, deliberate sip**, staring him down like she had **built an entire career on it.**

Loris, standing by the table, **watched her**, one eyebrow slightly raised, the **hint of a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth.**

And just like that, her **absurd rebellion** was set in motion.

Holy quinoa.

That was **not** what any hot beverage was **supposed** to taste like.

Not like **coffee.**

Not like **bourbon.**

Not like anything **safe or reasonable**.

It was a **hot version of the gasoline she drank last night**, except now **somehow worse**, because now it was **morning**, and her body was **fully aware** of what was happening to it.

She almost **gagged.**

Almost.

But—**she soldiered up.**

Because she had **meetings.**

Because she **represented him legally.**

Because she was **not losing** to this **Tuxedo Clown from the 1950s.**

She took another **sip**, forcing it down, forcing herself to **own it.**

Loris, still standing there, still **ridiculously composed**, still **watching her**, let the silence stretch between them.

Then—**finally, casually, amused—**

"You really are something, Zoe."

"You bet your little white privileged macho alcoholic condescending ass I am something."

Zoe slammed the **cup down**, ignoring the **horrific aftertaste** still searing her throat.

Then—**she stood up.**

Or at least—**she tried to.**

Because—**why are my legs wobbly?**

Her knees **threatened betrayal**, her thighs still **weak**, her whole **body still reeling from the absolute circus of last night and this morning.**

She **caught herself**, straightened her back, squared her shoulders.

Loris just **watched**, his smirk widening like he had already **predicted** this exact moment, like he had seen it **happen before**.

He didn't say a word.

Didn't need to.

And that—**that made her want to throw the coffee at him.**

"I am going to get dressed for meetings now," Zoe announced with the kind of defiance only sheer willpower and a stomach full of bourbon-spiked coffee could muster.

And then—

She fell.

Right onto her knees.

Ouch.

Loris moved quickly, kneeling to help her, concern flickering across his usually unshaken features.

But as he reached for her, Zoe batted him away, her words tumbling out in a half-coherent blur:

"What are you doing? I am supposed to be here. Because I am your lawyer. And I'm giving you a blowjob. Because that's what lawyers did in the 1950s…"

Her voice trailed off, her eyes fluttering, her body losing its fight against exhaustion and alcohol and everything else she'd been through in the last twelve hours.

And just like that—**she passed out.**

Loris stared down at her, his hand frozen midair, and muttered to himself,

"What the hell have I gotten myself into?"

When she **came to**, the world felt **blurry but intact.**

She groaned, shifted slightly, and—

Wait.

Loris was **there.**

Reading.

A **book.**

Not a **phone**, not a **tablet**, not an **e-reader**—a **physical, paper-paged, old-fashioned book.**

What kind of prehistoric fever dream was this?

She blinked. **Twice.**

Then she noticed the **juice** on the nightstand.

Her body **screamed for electrolytes.**

She reached for it, **downed it in one go** before her brain could even process the taste.

Oh yes.

Salts. Vitamins. Hydration.

And then—

Spicy.

Oh. Dear. Spicy.

Burning. Peppery. Sinister.

And—oh no. No, no, no.

BOOZE.

There was booze in this one too.

She coughed violently, eyes wide, and from behind his book, Loris smirked.

"Well, that is a way to have a Bloody Mary," he said, barely looking up.

"Why poison me?" she croaked, wiping her mouth, still reeling from the unexpected spice-alcohol ambush.

Then—she noticed.

Loris was **sipping from an identical glass.**

He raised an eyebrow, tilting the rim toward her in a **mock toast**.

"Hair of the dog…" he mused, **completely unbothered.**

Then, with that **infuriating smirk**, he added:

"But I've never seen so much enthusiasm. You surely are my special Zoe."

He set his glass down and stood up, smooth, collected, like a **man with nowhere to be but everywhere to own.**

"I'll immediately make you another."

Zoe groaned, **flopping back onto the bed.**

Holy quinoa.

She was **going to die here.**

But then—

Her brain **caught up.**

Not just *special.*

"My special."

Two little words.

Words that should have **set off alarms.**

Words that should have **triggered every feminist defense system she had.**

Words that should have **made her roll her eyes and deliver a cutting remark about ownership, possession, and male entitlement.**

But instead—

Why did she like that?

Why did it settle **deep** in her chest, warm and unsettling, like the afterburn of the Bloody Mary?

She stared at the ceiling, her thoughts an **absolute riot**, while Loris moved **easily,**

effortlessly, preparing another poisonous masterpiece in his ridiculous, anachronistic, utterly infuriating way.

And the worst part?

She knew she was going to drink it.

He put the glass in front of her.

A fresh Bloody Mary.

Spiced, chilled, unapologetic.

"Here you go, you anxious drinker."

She barely had time to process before he added, smoothly, almost like a thought escaping his lips:

"Believe me, I have never seen so much passion for a pick-me-up."

And then—

"Why am I falling so hard for you, Zoe?"

Zoe **froze.**

The words **landed**—not like a tease, not like some throwaway line meant to impress.

They felt **real.**

And she—**she honestly had no answer.**

She looked at the glass.

She looked at **him.**

She should say **something**—laugh it off, deflect, question it.

But **nothing came.**

Because **what the hell was this?**

And why, despite **everything**, did she feel like she might be falling too?

She **shifted** her position—

And—

Pain.

A dull, unmistakable **ache** in her **hip.**

Like she had **stretched too far**, like her **legs had been pushed past their usual limits.**

And then—

The **night came rushing back.**

The thrusts.

The **force.**

The **way her body had been taken, claimed, shattered, rebuilt—again and again.**

Oh. Oh. Oh.

Her face **went hot.**

A **full-body blush.**

Did he…?

Did he really **thrust that hard**?

Hard enough to make her **sore the next morning**?

She **sipped the Bloody Mary aggressively**, trying to **drown the memory before it drowned her.**

But across from her, Loris watched her with **that knowing look.**

Like he could **see exactly where her mind had gone.**

And—

He smirked.

She wanted to **shout at him**.

To tell him to **lose that smirk**, that insufferable, knowing expression that seemed to **read her thoughts before she even had them.**

To tell him she didn't **feel a thing.**

That she **faked all of it**.

That he should **stay in his place,** stop acting like he had her **figured out.**

Instead—

"Isn't there any celery for this drink?" she blurted, her voice sharper than she intended.

She froze.

Wait. Why did she even know about cocktails?

She wasn't a cocktail person.

Where had that even come from?

Loris, unfazed, simply raised an eyebrow, his smirk softening into something closer to amusement.

"Celery? Of course. How could I deny you the full experience?"

He stood, moving toward the kitchen with his usual unhurried grace.

And Zoe sat there, gripping the glass, cursing herself, and wondering why—why—she felt like she had just lost a battle she didn't even know she was fighting.

As Loris **laid the stick of celery** into her drink, elegant and precise, Zoe's brain **betrayed her.**

"Stick your thing in me again. Make me cum like last night, for quinoa's sake."

The thought **hit her like a truck.**

And—**oh no.**

She felt it.

A little wetness.

A **tiny, humiliating betrayal.**

She should **not** be thinking this.

She should **not** be feeling this.

She should be **angry, indignant, detached.**

But instead—

She forced a **deep breath**, straightened her back, and **pushed every filthy thought aside.**

Then, with as much composure as she could fake, she said:

"Let's go to those meetings, then."

Because—of course.

She had meetings.

(Whatever the hell that meant.)

"What meetings?" Loris asked, tilting his head slightly, feigning innocent curiosity.

Zoe blinked. What?

"Well… those you said you were going to."

He exhaled, a slow, lazy breath, as if the very idea amused him.

"I don't have any meetings."

Zoe froze.

"What?"

Loris leaned back, completely unbothered. "No man ever has. That's just what you say to make the woman go away."

Go. Away.

Her hand clenched around the Bloody Mary glass.

Her brain prepared a full-scale feminist nuclear detonation.

"Go. Away?" she repeated, the words ice-cold, her entire body vibrating with the kind of murderous rage that could fuel revolutions.

Loris—unmoved, untouched by the imminent threat of his own demise—continued, almost bored:

"Well, if she's the wife, she goes to the kitchen."

Oh. Oh. Oh.

She was on full murdering mode now.

He nonchalantly walked to the liquor cabinet, completely unbothered by the homicidal energy radiating from her.

Opened it.

Took his time. Too much time.

Then, as if this entire situation was nothing more than a mildly amusing inconvenience, he said:

"Well, not you. Not now, Zoe. As we said, you are my special."

That was it.

That was the last straw, match, and entire goddamn bonfire.

She launched at him.

Unguibus et rostro.

With nails and beak.

Not to fight.

Not to **argue**.

To maim. To kill. To exterminate.

Loris barely had time to react before she was **on him**, a whirlwind of **rage, limbs, and pure, unfiltered vengeance.**

And for the first time—**just for a second—**his smirk **faltered.**

As she **launched at him**, all **scratching, biting, pure unfiltered rage**, Loris barely had a second to react—

And then—

He slapped her back to the floor.

Not in **anger**. Not in **malice**.

Just—**effortless control.**

A single motion, fast and precise, sending her **sprawling onto the polished floor**, her breath caught in her throat.

For a second—**just a second**—she saw **something flicker in his expression.**

Not **amusement**. Not **arrogance.**

Something close to—**concern?**

He crouched, looking at her, his voice **calm but firm**.

"Zoe, are you well?"

She **blinked.**

What.

What **just happened?**

Her **entire body vibrated with adrenaline, with anger, with something else entirely**—something she refused to name.

She should **attack again**.

She should **scream, run, throw the goddamn Bloody Mary in his face.**

But she just **lay there**, staring at him, her breath ragged, her body **still processing what the hell she had just done.**

"Die, you macho monster!"

Zoe **clenched onto him**, her nails **digging in, her teeth searching for flesh**—not to fight, not to defend, but to **hurt. To cut.**

To **destroy.**

And then—

He slapped her back. Twice.

Backhanded.

Fast. Precise. Controlled.

Her **head snapped to the side**, a jolt of pain bursting through her body.

The world **tilted**, her breath caught somewhere between **rage and shock.**

And then—

His voice.

Steady. Unshaken. Almost… worried?

"Zoe, are you all right?"

She **froze.**

Her mind screamed **at full volume**, but her body—her body **didn't move.**

She should **attack again.**

She should **run.**

She should **do anything but sit there, staring at him, her heartbeat hammering in her ears, her breath coming in sharp, uneven gasps.**

But she just—**stayed.**

She **stood up**, shaking, fists clenched, her entire body **still buzzing** with rage, adrenaline, and something she couldn't—**wouldn't**—name.

Her voice came out **low, cold, cutting**:

"You are a macho, chauvinist, condescending piece of shit. Pathetic."

Loris blinked.

Then—a smirk.

"So?"

Zoe's breath hitched.

"So…" she started, words catching in her throat, her brain still catching up to itself.

Then, through gritted teeth:

"So show me the way out of this hell of reality."

Loris tilted his head, watching her like she was a puzzle he had almost solved.

"You mean the door?"

Her jaw clenched.

"Yes, you pathetic, useless prick."

Loris, completely **unfazed**, simply turned and **gestured casually** toward the door.

"Well, right there. By the key bowl."

Zoe **followed his finger.**

The **door.**

Right there.

Like it had been **the whole time.**

She could just **walk out.**

Just **leave.**

Just **end whatever the hell this was.**

And yet—

She **hesitated.**

"All right, I'll leave."

Zoe **turned away**, her steps **deliberate, final.**

Loris watched—silent, unbothered, as if he had already predicted this, as if he knew exactly how this was going to play out.

And then—

She spun back.

Took a running start.

And jumped on him.

Her body colliding into his, her hands grabbing, her lips crashing against his mouth, her breath ragged, desperate, furious.

"But only after you fuck me like last night."

A challenge. A demand. A surrender.

Loris barely had a moment to react before his hands locked around her, before he lifted her effortlessly, before he carried her straight to the nearest surface.

And then—

He **did.**

First, he **gave.**

Made her **shatter** beneath him, unravel, lose herself completely.

Then, he **took.**

Claimed her, consumed her, made her **his**, just as much as she was **taking him for herself.**

And then—

He **gave again.**

More. Harder. Deeper. Until there was nothing left but **pleasure, exhaustion, and the undeniable truth that neither of them could escape this now.**

Zoe lay there, **panting**, her body **shaking**, her entire existence **wrecked, destroyed, shattered into pieces**.

Her arms were still **wrapped around him**, her breath still **uneven**, her mind still **somewhere between pleasure and absolute denial**.

And then—

Soft, hesitant, almost **reluctant**, she muttered:

"I may··· mind my words—just may··· just a bit··· like you."

Loris **stilled.**

For the **first time**, he didn't **immediately smirk**, didn't **throw back some effortless retort.**

He just **looked at her.**

And in that brief, **wordless moment**, something shifted.

Zoe, still half-breathless, still refusing to fully process what just happened (again), muttered:

"How about all those meetings you don't have?"

Loris, lying there beside her, utterly **unbothered, still in that ridiculous state of post-coital grace**, tilted his head and smirked.

"It's lunchtime, you orgasm-craving perfection of mine. Didn't you notice among all your squirts?"

Zoe's **face burned**.

Because—

Because **he wasn't wrong.**

She had **begged** for it. **Demanded it.** Again and again.

And now, she did the only thing she **could** do—

Faked indifference.

She stretched, pretending like she wasn't still **shaking**, pretending like she wasn't **absolutely ruined by him**, and deadpanned:

“So what happens in this universe of yours? You inhale martinis and food?”

Loris, with the same casual confidence as always, ran a hand through his perfectly disheveled hair and said:

“No, we go to lunch.”

As if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Loris walked her into the rotisserie section of a big, classic restaurant.

He looked effortless, wearing a morning tan suit, crisp, composed, exuding that ridiculous, timeless confidence like he had just stepped out of a film reel.

Zoe, on the other hand—

Last night's sweaty hemp club clothes.

A mess.

The contrast was painful.

She could feel every eye in the restaurant flicking toward them, questioning, judging, assuming things.

Loris, of course, didn't care.

He guided her to the table, smooth as ever, as if the world bent to his rhythm.

And before she could even process where they were, two martinis were deposited in front of them.

Zoe stared at hers.

Clear liquid, pristine, probably lethal.

She exhaled sharply, glaring at it like a sworn enemy.

"Gasoline again?" she muttered under her breath, her soul already exhausted.

Then, eyes flicking up toward the ceiling, whispering to whatever cosmic force had dragged her into this madness—

"Dear kale..."

Loris sipped his martini, utterly unfazed, and asked,

"How do you take it?"

Zoe, still half-dazed, still rebelling against the world **and herself**, smirked and shot back:

"Many times and preferably from behind, as you already know from last night."

Then—

A sound.

A soft, **awkward throat-clearing.**

She turned.

And **froze.**

The **waiter.**

Standing **right there.**

Blushing **furiously**, eyes desperately flicking between his **notepad and the abyss**, clearly **trying to disappear from existence.**

Zoe went **full livid.**

Her **entire soul evacuated her body.**

Meanwhile, Loris, still cool as the martini in his glass, didn't even flinch.

"Rare, please."

The waiter nodded stiffly, writing it down like it was the most urgent diplomatic matter of his life.

Zoe, face burning, scrambled for damage control.

She smiled nervously, pointed at Loris, and mouthed, "Same."

The waiter fled.

Loris—still utterly composed, still sipping his martini like this was a Tuesday morning tradition—

Smirked.

Loris leaned back, sipping his martini, and said, utterly composed:

"So, you walk into my life, make me fall in love with you, and now embarrass my waiter?"

Zoe's brain completely imploded.

What the fuckity quinoa mother of a kale?

Love?

What?

When?

WHAT THE—

Her hands scrambled for the martini, desperately seeking support, stability, salvation.

She took a gulp.

Bad idea.

The gasoline hit hard.

She coughed.

Spit.

Loris casually reached for his napkin and handed it to her, looking amused but not at all surprised.

Still dizzy from the verbal explosion she just suffered, Zoe finally managed to croak out:

"Your waiter?"

Because, apparently, that was the only part of the sentence her brain was capable of handling right now.

"I love you, Zoe."

Her brain had barely recovered from that when he added, completely unbothered:

"Couldn't you tell by the way I squirted my cum over your face last night?"

Zoe malfunctioned.

There was no other word for it.

Her entire system **shut down, rebooted, then crashed again.**

She was **still coughing from the martini**, trying to use the **napkin to wipe her mouth**, and instead—

She smacked herself in the forehead.

Full impact.

Like a **self-inflicted exorcism.**

The entire restaurant **existed around her**, but **she was no longer present in this reality.**

Meanwhile, Loris—**completely composed, sipping his martini like he had just commented on the weather—**

Just **watched her.**

Smirking.

Because **of course.**

Loris took another sip, watching her over the rim of his glass, completely unaffected.

"I'm not much of an artist, but you can't say I didn't nail it somehow."

Zoe, still reeling, still trying to process her own existence, could only blink as he continued—completely straight-faced, like they were discussing a business strategy.

"On the chin, then around the cheekbones, under the eyes, and on the nose."

And just like that—the memory slammed into her.

Oh.

Oh.

She remembered.

The warmth, the mess, the absolute filth of it.

She even **remembered him handing her a mirror—like a goddamn masterpiece had just been completed.**

And—

And **she remembered laughing.**

Saying, through a haze of exhaustion and post-orgasm delirium:

"Look, a heart! You must love me then."

And he had just **smirked**, as he always did, as if he had already **known exactly where this was going.**

Now, sitting in a **very public restaurant, drinking a martini that still tasted like regret,** she had **only one question left.**

Why the fuck had she said that?

Loris leaned in slightly, setting his martini down with **deliberate ease**, his gaze locking onto hers.

His smirk? **Gone.**

His usual effortless, unbothered demeanor? **Nowhere to be found.**

Instead—his voice came **low, steady, without a trace of irony.**

"Zoe, do you understand I love you?"

Her breath hitched.

He wasn't **teasing.**

Wasn't **mocking.**

Wasn't playing one of his **infuriating games.**

"Or do you think this is a cruel joke?"

The words **hung between them**, heavier than anything he had said before.

Zoe's fingers tightened around the **stem of her martini glass.**

She wanted to **laugh it off**, to roll her eyes, to throw back a sarcastic remark about how he didn't **own her, didn't get to claim her like some noir film femme fatale.**

But—**she couldn't.**

Because despite **every fiber of her logical, kale-powered, socially conscious, feminist, modern brain screaming that this was impossible**—

She felt something **dangerous** rising in her chest.

And she had no **fucking** idea what to do with it.

"Just a moment," Zoe said, her voice oddly distant, as if she wasn't entirely present.

She pulled out her **phone**.

Checked it.

Screen **lit up**. Touchscreen **responsive**.

Instagram—**loaded.**

TikTok—perfectly up to date.

She scrolled through familiar chaos, influencers, news, memes, all the nonsense of 2025.

Then—she called Priya.

The line barely rang before her friend picked up, voice frantic.

"Girl, where have you been? We worried sick, we almost—"

"Are we still in 2025?" Zoe cut in, her voice sharp, urgent.

Silence.

Then—"What?"

"2025?" she repeated.

Priya, now fully annoyed, snapped: "The fuck, Zoe? Yes, 2025, but—"

Zoe hung up.

She sat back, staring at her **phone**, as if it could somehow **confirm reality itself.**

And then—

She looked at **him.**

At **Loris. Lorenzo Velluti. This man who was from—where? When? How?**

And yet—**he was here.**

And she was **here.**

And this—**whatever the fuck this was—was happening.**

So she exhaled, leaned forward, and asked, **calm, direct, absolutely serious:**

"Will you fuck me every single night like last night?"

Loris didn't even **blink**.

Didn't **pause.**

Didn't react like the question was even remotely unusual.

His voice was as simple as if he were stating that **the sky was blue, that water was wet, that reality itself was a given.**

"Of course."

Zoe stared at him for a moment longer.

Then, slowly, she lifted her martini, clinked it lightly against his, and said:

"Then I love you too, Lorenzo Velluti… from some other time."

Then—**the steaks arrived.**

Along with **the second martinis.**

Loris, ever the **effortless force of nature**, **finished his** before she had even properly **sipped hers.**

And yet—**another appeared.**

She **stared** at her glass, then at him, then at the **waiter**, who was clearly **part of whatever ritual was unfolding.**

Then—

A **slab of grilled··· meat?**

Thick, glistening, perfectly seared.

Placed **right in front of her.**

Her **vegan, animal-friendly, plant-based self froze.**

Because that wasn't **tofu.**

That wasn't some **jackfruit-based alternative.**

That was **real.**

Dead.

Animal.

She blinked at it, her soul on the verge of **spontaneous combustion.**

And across from her, **Loris Velluti**, perfectly at ease, already **cutting into his steak**, paused just long enough to **glance up at her reaction.**

And—**smirked.**

Zoe **tilted her head back**, staring at the ceiling as if some **gluten-free deity** resided up there, watching over lost vegans in moments of crisis.

Then—**a deep breath.**

"Guess I'm drinking car petrol before facing this."

And with **zero hesitation**, she grabbed her **martini**, steeled herself—

And **downed it.**

All of it.

In **one go.**

Her face **contorted instantly**, every fiber of her being **rejecting the brutal assault of gin and vermouth.**

Her throat burned. **Her soul burned.**

She barely **held back a gag**, her expression one of **pure disgust and betrayal.**

And across from her, Loris—**completely composed, mid-chew, sipping his own martini at a much more civilized pace—**

Simply watched.

Amused.

Waiting.

Zoe **exhaled sharply**, still **recovering** from the martini burn, her stomach now bracing for the next betrayal.

She stared at the **steak**, poked it lightly with her fork, as if it might **move**, as if she still had time to **renounce this carnivorous madness**.

Then, with slow, **cautious horror**, she muttered:

"So this is dead animal flesh."

It wasn't a question.

It was **a statement. A realization. A eulogy.**

She leaned in slightly, the scent **hitting her full force**—smoky, rich, undeniably **delicious.**

Too **damn good** to be **dead flesh.**

Her **brain fought back.**

Her **body leaned closer.**

And across from her, **Loris Velluti**, cutting into his steak with the same **calm precision he applied to everything**, simply raised an eyebrow.

Waiting.

Because he already **knew.**

Zoe's **eyes locked** onto Loris' plate.

The **piece of flesh** he was cutting into—

That was raw.

Still bleeding.

Still dripping with whatever primal essence of life it once had.

Her stomach twisted.

Her vegan soul screamed.

But—

Holy kale chips, it smelled so damn good.

The sear, the juices, the absurd richness of it—it was everything she was supposed to reject.

And yet—

She swallowed hard, her mouth watering against her will.

Loris, completely unbothered, forked a perfectly rare bite, brought it to his lips, and ate it slowly.

Then, seeing her stare, he smirked—**that smug, insufferable, all-knowing smirk.**

Waiting.

Because he already **knew.**

Should I cut a piece?

Zoe's **hand hovered** over the knife, her brain **screaming protests** in all caps, bold, and underlined.

IT'S DEAD ALREADY.

So maybe—**just maybe**—to **prove a point.**

To show these **barbaric meat-eaters** just **how disgusting it is** to cut into **dead animal tissue.**

To demonstrate, **visibly, dramatically**, the sheer **horror** of slicing into something that was once **alive**—

This **little bit of seared-out, raw-inside, perfectly tender, juicy, dripping, aromatic**—

Goddammit.

She cut into it.

The knife slid through effortlessly, the juices pooling, the inside a perfect, scandalous pink.

Her mouth—against all laws of nature, veganism, and self-respect—

Watered.

Damn you.

She ate it.

The piece of forbidden, primal, perfectly seared, scandalously juicy flesh.

And the moment it hit her tongue—

Fuck you, Lorenzo Velluti.

Because it was delicious.

Unholy. Sinful.

Rich, buttery, **unlike anything she had ever tasted.**

Her body **betrayed her** completely, every bite dissolving decades of **plant-based righteousness** in **mere seconds.**

She chewed. Swallowed. **Hated herself.**

Then, slowly, she looked up, eyes burning with **rage and regret**, and muttered:

"May kale haunt you for the rest of your life."

Loris, watching her with **that insufferable smirk**, took another sip of his martini and replied,

"Gladly, my special."

As **Loris put his knife and fork down**, his **plate completely clean**, the **third martini arrived**—like clockwork, like an unspoken rule of the universe he inhabited.

He took a **slow sip**, composed as ever.

Meanwhile—

Zoe's **second martini sat untouched**, her **steak barely eaten**—though she had already **crossed the line, had already betrayed the Church of Kale, had already sunk into carnivorous damnation.**

The **waiter approached**, voice polite but cautious.

"Is madame done with her plate?"

Without thinking, Zoe **snapped her hand over her plate, defending it like a lioness over a fresh kill.**

"Madame is pretty much not finished devouring flesh of a once-living creature."

The waiter **froze.**

Blink. Blink.

Then, **backed up.**

Loris, sipping his martini, watching the chaos unfold like fine theater, let out the softest, most entertained exhale.

Zoe, pulse still high, decided to double down on the madness.

She grabbed her second martini, the one she had neglected, and—

Violently gulped it down.

All of it.

The burn was brutal, her throat hating her, her body confused, her soul in shambles.

Then, she exhaled, wiped her mouth, and declared:

"And madame will now chew on some animal flesh while drinking rocket fuel. So back off!"

The waiter nodded, bowed slightly, and got the hell away from whatever catastrophe was happening at this table.

Loris?

He just **smiled.**

Loris swirled his **third martini**, watching her with a gaze that felt **too steady, too certain**, like he had already played out this moment in his mind long before it happened.

Then, voice low, unrushed, **almost absentminded**, he said:

"I think my heart stopped beating when you started slipping on that hardwood floor with your moccasins… and just started beating again when you sat by me. I couldn't believe my luck."

Zoe **froze mid-bite.**

Her fork, still holding **dead animal flesh**, hovered near her mouth.

Her **brain glitched.**

Since when was she the kind of person who got noticed across a whole **room?**

Since when did men like him—poised, timeless, martini-drinking tuxedo men—see her like that?

She shoved another bite of steak into her mouth to buy herself time, to keep her thoughts from slipping into dangerous places.

Because she wasn't ready for this conversation.

Because if she let herself believe it—

If she let herself believe she had been seen—

She might not be able to leave.

Loris leaned forward slightly, fingers still resting on his martini glass, eyes locked onto her.

"Did you even see me?" he asked, voice smooth, deliberate. "Or did you just sit where Ralph pointed?"

Zoe paused, her fork hovering uselessly over her forgotten steak.

Her **third martini—her last remaining ally—** became a **walking stick for her reality.**

She **sipped.**

Hard.

Then she blinked. **Thought back.**

She hadn't seen **anyone** in the bar.

Just **Ralph.**

Just **Loris.**

Just that damn **platinum cigarette case, the tuxedo, the way time had twisted itself the moment she stepped through that heavy velvet drape.**

But—

When the music ended… people had applauded.

Her stomach turned.

Were there **other people?**

Had there been?

She tried to **remember faces. Sounds.**

Nothing came back.

Only **him.**

Only **Loris Velluti.**

Dear quinoa.

She had **liked him** since **first sight.**

Zoe **gripped her martini glass tighter**, her pulse betraying her, her mind **racing through memories she hadn't even realized she'd been holding onto.**

She had **liked him** the moment she stepped into that bar.

The **moment he turned his head and smiled at her.**

The **moment he raised his glass, effortlessly composed, like he had been waiting for her.**

She had **liked him when she didn't even know what the fuck this was.**

And now—

Now she was sitting here, eating **dead animal flesh**, drinking **rocket fuel martinis**, and **realizing**—

Oh, fuck.

She was **already gone.**

And she had **loved him since…**

No.

No, no, no.

She wasn't that **material.**

She wasn't the **kind of woman** who just **lost herself in orgasms** and **mistook it for love.**

She wasn't.

Right?

But—

She had come so hard with him.

Not just physically.

Not just in body.

Something else had cracked open inside her.

The way he held her in his arms as she spasmed, as if he was keeping her together while she fell apart.

She had lived him then.

And—

Loved him since.

Damn you, Loris Velluti.

"Damn you, Lorenzo Velluti."

Zoe took a **final, decisive sip of her martini**, stared straight into his **ridiculously composed, tuxedo-clad existence**, and—

"I'll marry you then. Call your family."

Loris **spit his martini.**

A **full, actual spit-take.**

His **first moment of genuine loss of control.**

The glass **slammed onto the table** as he wiped his mouth, blinking at her like she had just **declared the moon was made of kale chips and quinoa was the secret to immortality.**

Zoe, still holding her own glass like a **weaponized statement**, leaned back, crossed her legs, and arched an eyebrow.

What now?

Now it was his turn to deal with the impossible.

"You're not marrying me, Zoe-I-Don't-Know-Surname-But-I'm-Sure-It's-Lovely-Because-You-Are."

Loris wiped his mouth, set his martini down with measured precision, and looked at her with that same maddening calm.

"Relax about that."

Zoe stared.

Her brain short-circuited.

Not because she had actually meant it.

Not because she had expected him to take it seriously.

But because—

Because he didn't even hesitate to shut it down.

Like it was never an option.

Like marrying her was some unthinkable concept.

And why did that piss her off?

He laughed.

Not just a smirk, not a scoff—an actual, deep, amused laugh.

Like she had said something so ridiculous, so absurd that it was beyond comprehension.

Then, still chuckling, still watching her like she was a delightful puzzle he had all the time in the world to figure out, he said:

"Why did you think that was an issue?"

Zoe's eyelid twitched.

Her pulse jumped.

Because WHAT THE FUCK DID THAT EVEN MEAN?

She wasn't sure if she wanted to throw her martini at his face or kiss him until he had no more words left.

Both.

Probably both.

"My lovely spirit," Loris began, his tone softer, though still laced with that infuriating ease, **"whose last name I still don't know…"**

Zoe glared, gripping her empty martini glass like it might spontaneously combust.

"I'd love to marry you, if we both agreed on it right now," he continued, leaning slightly forward, his eyes locking onto hers.

Then, with that maddening calm that made her both want to scream and melt, he added:

"But why bring it up now?"

Zoe's jaw tightened.

Because she had no **fucking clue**.

Because she had just **spit it out** like it was the **most logical conclusion to the chaotic fever dream they were living in.**

And now—**now he was looking at her like she had to explain herself.**

Why, Zoe? Why bring it up now?

She opened her mouth—then closed it.

And instead, she muttered, **"You're impossible."**

Loris, of course, just **smiled.**

"Carter. Zoe Carter."

She **stated it with intent**, like it **meant something**, like it **had weight**, like she was **staking her claim in whatever absurd universe this was.**

Loris **studied her for a moment**, then—

With his usual, **impossibly smooth precision**, he flipped open his **platinum cigarette case**,

plucked one between his fingers, and placed it between his lips.

Unlit. **Waiting.**

Then, exhaling slowly, he murmured:

"I admire your courage, Miss Carter."

Zoe **tilted her head**, playing along, the game now fully set.

"And I admire your luck, Mr…"

And then—

Somewhere, as if the very **fabric of reality understood the weight of the moment**, a **strange, electric guitar riff**—deep, unmistakable, a pure **007 classic sting—**

Played.

Loris—**utterly unfazed**, as if the world itself moved to his rhythm—**lit his cigarette, took a slow drag, and finally responded:**

"Velluti. Lorenzo Velluti."

A slow smirk.

"Call me Loris."

And that's where girls fell.

Where girls fall.

Because—sorry, feminists—but it is.

It's in the unshaken confidence, the way he moves like the world exists for him, not against him, the martinis and tuxedos and platinum cigarette cases, the way he says his name like it's a brand, a signature, a fate.

Velluti. Lorenzo Velluti. Call me Loris.

Zoe melted.

Like a cioccolatino on the hot hood of a Fiat 500 left in the Roman sun.

(*Wait.*)

(*What?*)

(*Why was she suddenly daydreaming about Europe?*)

(*Why did her brain just put her in Rome, as if she had always belonged there, as if she had been waiting under a sun-drenched balcony for some sharply dressed man to take her to a terrazza with a bottle of Barolo?*)

The **martini**, the **steak**, the **raw magnetism of this impossible man**—

It was all **messing with her.**

And she had **zero escape.**

Without an **accent**, like someone who had **spoken Italian in another lifetime**, Loris said,

"Ti porterò a mangiare la migliore pizza di Napoli."

A **smile**, slow, knowing.

Then—

"Sotto la mia protezione."

Zoe **blinked.**

She had **studied languages**. She had **her basic Italian**.

Best pizza in **Naples**? That, she **understood**.

But—**sotto··· protezione?**

Her mind **raced.**

Protezione.

Protection?

Like **safety**? Like **care**?

Or—

Or **like something else?**

Something **older, heavier, untouchable**?

Her **third martini suddenly felt stronger.**

"Come. I'll have a taxi called."

Loris said it **like a fact**, not a plan. Like the **universe itself** bent to his will and aligned yellow cars in front of his whims.

Zoe rolled her **eyes internally**.

"Of course you'll have..." she thought.

"In 1958."

Because that was **where he lived**, wasn't it? Not in **2025**, not in a world of **Ubers, Google Maps, and overpriced oat milk lattes**.

She **pulled out her phone** just to be sure.

Checked the date.

Checked the apps.

Still 2025.

Still **reality.**

But before she could spiral further into her **own confusion**—

The **taxi had already arrived.**

Of course it had.

They got off the taxi, and—

What?

A cigar room?

Zoe stopped in her tracks, blinking hard.

She checked her phone again.

2025.

Checked the street signs. The surroundings. The people.

Still 2025.

And yet—

The place in front of her was anything but.

Dark wood panels. Leather armchairs. A faint haze of cigar smoke lingering in the air like it had been there since men still wore hats unironically.

Old men in **three-piece suits** sat with whiskey tumblers and **actual newspapers**, flicking through them with **slow, deliberate movements.**

Everything smelled like **tobacco, aged leather, and history.**

She turned to Loris.

He was already **walking in**, moving like this place was just **another extension of his world.**

And—**of course.**

Of course **he belonged here.**

She **walked in.**

In her **hemp clothes.**

Unwashed **since yesterday.**

Surrounded by **men in pressed suits, polished shoes, the soft crackle of whiskey against ice, the low hum of deep, deliberate conversations.**

She should have **felt out of place.**

Should have **stuck out like an ironic street performer at a gala.**

But—

She didn't.

Loris **moved effortlessly** through the space, leading her to a **pair of twin leather armchairs**, dark and worn, the kind that had **stories soaked into them.**

He sat.

Gestured for her to **do the same.**

Then—without asking, without checking—**he ordered for both.**

Cigars.

Cognac.

Because **of course he did.**

And Zoe—

Zoe **sank into the chair.**

The leather **wrapped around her**, its scent rising—

Horse saddle. Fireplace smoke. Time.

And in that moment—

Oh, yes.

Mama belongs here.

The **cognac arrived.**

Deep amber, swirling lazily in a **short, heavy glass.**

Zoe didn't give it time.

More petrol?

She'd **soldier it down**, just like she had with the martinis, the steak, the absurdity of it all.

So she took a **gulp.**

And—

Oh.

Oh, moly molly of an avocado.

This was not petrol.

This was not an attack.

This was—

This was what Loris did to her at night.

Heat, slow and deliberate, unfolding across her tongue, down her throat, curling into her stomach like a purring, golden secret.

Where had this liquid ecstasy come from?

She barely had time to think before her brain caught up.

Oh.

Cognac.

Of course.

She exhaled, the **aftertaste stretching like silk**, and somewhere in her mind, an image formed—

France.

Where else would something like **this** exist?

Loris **smiled.**

That **lazy, knowing, infuriating smile** that said he was **already two steps ahead of reality itself.**

Zoe, feeling the **cognac spread through her veins like velvet**, leaned in **dead serious** and said:

"Either you eat me and make me cum in front of this whole room of useless, uptight, small-penis owners… or you buy me many of those again. One right now."

Silence.

Then—**a presence.**

She turned her head **slowly.**

The waiter.

Standing **right there.**

Eyes **wider than a silver tray**, holding a bottle, visibly debating whether to **run or die on the spot.**

Zoe's brain **screamed internally.**

Her mouth, however—

"Oh, not him," she muttered, half to herself, half to **reality itself.**

Damage control. **Now.**

So she raised her hands, mimed a **very long and wide cylinder**, and **winked heavily.**

As if that would **somehow fix things.**

The waiter made a **choking noise.**

Loris?

He just **laughed.**

"It's not that big," Loris said, still effortlessly smooth, still absolutely enjoying himself.

Zoe's jaw dropped.

"It's not that big? I'm sore to the bottom of my—
"

She stopped.

Looked to her side.

The waiter.

Still there.

Still frozen in existential crisis.

Still very much absorbing every word.

She narrowed her eyes. "You could have walked away many minutes ago, couldn't you?"

The waiter nodded.

Very slowly.

Zoe exhaled, **rolled her shoulders back**, and flicked her fingers.

"Then shoo now."

But—**she blinked at him in a very specific way.**

A **slow, deliberate, 'I'll tell you later' kind of blink.**

The waiter **hesitated**, swallowed, and then **vanished with the urgency of a man fleeing a crime scene.**

Loris took another **sip of cognac**, watching the entire exchange with deep, **deep amusement.**

"I think he likes you."

Zoe groaned, picked up her glass, and **drank to forget.**

Then came the **cigars.**

Loris? **A regular Montecristo.** Classic. Elegant. **Predictable.**

Zoe?

An outrageously vulgar, pornographic Salomon.

A monster of a cigar, a statement, the cigar equivalent of wearing thigh-high boots and demanding the world kneel.

Loris lit his effortlessly, leaned back, and laughed his soul off.

Zoe?

Zoe took the joke.

She owned the joke.

She took her obscenely large cigar, placed it between her lips, and, for the entire cigar club of micro-penises, proceeded to mimic a full-blown Pornhub-worthy blowjob.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Eye contact.

Deep.

The kind of performance that would make the algorithm push her to page one.

And then—

For the finale—

She took a deep pull, leaned back, and let the final cloud of smoke land all over her face.

The waiter, appearing from nowhere, arms crossed, voice smooth and knowing, simply said:

"My girl."

Loris?

Loris was still laughing.

Still shaking his head.

And—maybe, just maybe—

Still falling deeper in love.

Loris, still **shaking his head**, still **recovering from laughter**, took another slow, **measured drag** of his cigar.

Then, without **mystery, without hesitation, without the usual games**, he exhaled and said:

"No mystery. I am falling deeper in love by any moment you exist."

Zoe **froze mid-smoke.**

The weight of the words **hit her differently** this time.

Because he **meant it.**

No smirk.

No teasing.

Just **fact.**

Like it was as natural as breathing, as obvious as the **cognac in their glasses and the smoke curling in the air.**

She didn't know **how to handle that.**

So she **took another drag**, blew the smoke out **slowly**, and muttered, half to herself:

"Dear kale, I'm so fucked."

Zoe **sighed**, exhaling a slow, dramatic plume of smoke, and finally **gave in.**

"Okay, I love you too."

She **said it fast**, like ripping off a Band-Aid, like **it wasn't the single most ridiculous, life-altering thing she had ever admitted.**

Then—**before he could smirk, before he could turn it into one of his smug little victories,** she leaned forward, eyes sharp.

"But now stop embarrassing me in front of our new micro-penis, cock-size, cigar-chugging friends."

She gestured vaguely to the **old men in suits, swirling whiskey, puffing on overpriced phallic**

extensions, collectively pretending not to be listening.

"What will they think of us?"

Loris took a leisurely sip of cognac, watching her with something between amusement and deep, undeniable adoration.

Then, just loud enough for the entire room of fragile egos to hear, he replied:

"They will think I am the luckiest man alive."

The waiter audibly choked.

Zoe buried her face in her hands.

Fucking Lorenzo Velluti.

Zoe tilted her head back, blowing out another slow, theatrical plume of smoke, before fixing Loris with a deadpan stare.

"You are."

She let that sit. Let it **settle** in the air between them, between the **cognac fumes and the thick, masculine arrogance of the room.**

Then—

"And you knew it the moment Ralph said so."

Loris' smirk **twitched**, just for a second, just enough for Zoe to **catch it**—a rare moment where she had **beat him to his own game.**

He swirled his **cognac**, took another **slow sip**, then nodded, like a man accepting an **undeniable truth.**

"Of course."

The **waiter audibly whispered** to himself: **"My girl."**

Zoe didn't even **flinch** this time.

Because **yeah, she was.**

Zoe leaned forward, stubbed out the **outrageously pornographic** cigar, and exhaled one last **cloud of smoke**, staring at Loris like she was **issuing a royal decree.**

"Now bring me somewhere where you can make me squirt again."

Loris, mid-sip of his **cognac**, paused.

Eyebrow **lifted.**

Smirk **slowly forming.**

Before he could **respond**, before he could **turn it into some smug little victory**, she turned her head—**straight to the waiter.**

"He's going to make me squirt."

The waiter, by now **fully invested** in this fever dream of a relationship, **nodded, proud.**

"My girl!"

Loris finally **laughed,** shook his head, then stood up—**offering his hand.**

Zoe took it.

Because of **course she did.**

Zoe had **squirted way more than expected.**

Way. **More.**

This was no longer **a passionate triumph**—this was a **logistical crisis.**

Emergency No. 2: Mop bodily fluids before someone slips and dies.

Emergency No. 1: Rehydrate the girl before she dissolves into a post-orgasmic husk.

Loris—who was normally **composed, calculated, in control of all things at all times**—was now **running an electrolyte marathon** between the kitchen and the bed, grabbing **anything remotely hydrating.**

Water.

Coconut water.

Juice.

More water.

Electrolyte tablets.

For the **first time**, he looked **almost concerned.**

Zoe, still **splayed across the bed, dazed, her entire soul temporarily disconnected from reality, guzzled fluids like a desert traveler at an oasis.**

She exhaled, finally **catching her breath**, blinking up at the ceiling, her voice hoarse but still **carrying a touch of mischief**.

"Okay, I'll come again for you if you want…"

A long pause.

Then—**weakly, honestly, undeniably:**

"But I am rather unwell."

Loris **dragged a hand through his hair**, stared at the mess that was **both her and the floor**, then, in a rare moment of speechlessness, simply muttered:

"Jesus Christ."

Zoe, still recovering, still breathing like she had just run a marathon she didn't sign up for, rolled her head to the side and looked at Loris.

He was watching her, half-smirking, half-bewildered, still processing the fact that he had to mop up bodily fluids like a crime scene.

And then—she said it.

"Loris, we cannot definitely talk about this in front of our grandchildren."

Loris froze.

Actually froze.

Like she had just spoken Latin backwards or suggested communism at a country club.

His jaw twitched.

His martini-fueled, reality-bending, smooth-talk-ready brain had clearly not anticipated this particular phrase in this particular moment.

Then, after a full beat of silence, he exhaled, wiped a hand down his face, and muttered:

"We are not discussing grandchildren while I am standing in a puddle of your orgasm."

Zoe, despite being on the verge of dehydration-induced death, actually laughed.

Next morning.

Loris—because of course—arranged another yellow taxi.

No Uber.

No rideshare apps.

Just a classic, old-school taxi, because why would he bother with the modern world when he could just bend it to his will?

Zoe, still smelling like Cuban cigars, cognac, and the remnants of last night's absolute destruction of all her previous life choices, didn't even fight it.

She let him take her.

To the university.

Because, apparently, this was real life and she still had classes.

And—because Loris **was Loris**—he insisted on **walking her to her classroom.**

Which should have been normal.

Except—

Except for the fact that this was **university**, not **high school**, and yet—

Bullies?

At university?

Really?

They **bumped into him** on purpose, the kind of **cheap, outdated aggression** that should have died in adolescence.

"Well, look at mister suit."

Zoe **blinked.**

Loris **stopped.**

Adjusted his cuffs.

And smiled.

That **slow, deeply amused, extremely dangerous smile.**

Oh.

Oh, they had no **idea what they had just done.**

Loris, **utterly unbothered, adjusted his cuffs**, exhaled a slow breath, and—**smiled.**

That **slow, amused, too-calm smile** that usually meant someone was about to regret their life choices.

Then, in **flawless, effortless charm**, he said:

"Awfully sorry, guys. Who knows where I had my head?

He **gestured slightly toward Zoe**, eyes still on them, voice still smooth.

"This girl by my side confuses me.

A pause—just long enough for the tension to settle, for the silence to feel thick.

Then—the final touch, the perfect play.

"Pardon, okay?"

He tilted his head slightly, as if actually offering them the chance to be decent human beings.

Zoe, watching the scene unfold like a script she hadn't been handed, felt her pulse jump.

Because oh no.

This wasn't just an apology.

This was bait.

And the bullies had no idea they were standing in a trap.

Bully No. 1: "Not okay at all, suit guy."

Bully No. 2: "You owe us big time."

Loris tilted his head slightly, studying them like they were entertaining but ultimately unimpressive street performers.

Then, with a slow exhale, he gave them the smile.

That infuriating, lazy, all-knowing smile.

"Owe you guys?" he repeated, voice dripping with pure, unbothered amusement.

Then, with a small shrug, hands open, perfectly relaxed:

"Why didn't you say so? Let's keep things easy. Name your price."

The bullies froze.

They hadn't expected that.

They had expected anger. Resistance. Tough-guy posturing.

But Loris was playing a different game.

So, after a beat, after a few sideways glances at each other, they finally named their price.

A ridiculous number. A test. A joke. A "let's see what the rich asshole does" move.

And just like that—

Loris reached into his perfectly tailored suit, pulled out cash, and paid them.

No hesitation. No second thought.

He handed them the bills with the same ease as if he were leaving a tip for good service.

"Here you go, big fellas."

Then, patting one of them lightly on the shoulder, smirking just enough to twist the knife:

"Why didn't you say so before? Have one on me."

The bullies stared at the money.

Then at **each other.**

Then at **him.**

Their **brains failing to process how they had just won and still, somehow, lost.**

Zoe, standing beside him, completely **speechless,** whispered to herself:

"This is black magic."

Then, with **perfect, unshaken ease**, Loris turned to her, **right there in front of the bullies, the students, the entire damn university**, and **kissed her.**

Elegant. Controlled.

But still—**undeniably sexual.**

Not **too much**, not **too little**—just enough to say ***mine* without a single word.**

When he pulled back, his hand lingering just a moment on her waist, he **smirked** and said:

"You tell me when you're free."

Zoe blinked, her brain lagging, still trying to catch up.

She opened her mouth—

"I don't have your number—"

But—he was gone.

Like a phantom in a perfect suit.

Like he had never been there.

And Zoe, standing alone outside her classroom, smelling like cigars and expensive sex, still processing the pure chaos of the last 24 hours, could only whisper:

"What the actual kale smoothie just happened?"

Bully No. 1—Kyle.

(Real name: Charles.)

Lived with his mother.

The love of the household?

Choochy.

A poodle.

A small, yappy, ridiculous poodle, treated like royalty, pampered more than Kyle himself had ever been.

The following morning.

Kyle woke up.

Groggy. Unaware. Stumbling out of sleep.

Until—

Until his hand brushed against something wet.

Something wrong.

He blinked. Sat up. Looked down.

And—

And **screamed.**

Because there, on his **sheets**, right beside him—

Choochy's severed head.

Eyes **still open**, mouth **slightly parted**, that ridiculous **groomed fluff stained red.**

Kyle **fell out of bed, shaking, breath hitching, heart hammering against his ribs.**

Who?

Why?

Nobody knows.

Right?

The news hit the university hard.

A poodle's severed head.

Left in a bed.

Straight out of a horror movie, a mafia warning, or a fever dream of absolute psychopathy.

Kyle—**Charles, whatever his damn name was—**had shown up to campus pale, shaking, eyes darting like a trapped animal.

People talked.

People whispered.

Because who does that?

But—nobody knew anything.

Or at least—nobody said so.

The university, for all its pretentious academia and progressive ideals, was still a place of quiet violence.

People picked sides.

People watched.

And somewhere in the background, sipping a martini at an hour where martinis should not be sipped, Loris Velluti read the headlines and smiled.

Then came **Bully No. 2.**

Name: Pato.

(**Patricio.**)

Had a **grandmother.**

A **beloved**, fragile old woman **living in a retirement home**—the kind with **polished floors, pastel-colored walls, and an air of slow, waiting death.**

One **afternoon**—

She was **walking.**

Or rather—**shuffling**, making her way across the lobby, heading for the **elevator** that would take her to her usual spot by the **poolside.**

Except—

She **never made it.**

Because—

She **slipped.**

On a **banana peel.**

One **single, perfectly placed banana peel.**

And instead of **falling gently, maybe bruising a hip, maybe laughing it off—**

She fell **forward.**

Into **motion.**

Straight onto the **183-step staircase** leading down to the pool.

She did **all 183 steps.**

With a **broken neck.**

Every **thud, every roll, every sickening bounce** witnessed by at least **six retirees and one horrified nurse—**

All of whom agreed later:

She **should have just taken the lift.**

The one that was **right there.**

By the **stairs.**

But instead—

Instead, she **tumbled, flipped, cracked, and landed** in a way that **nobody could ever quite explain.**

And by the time she **hit the bottom**, lifeless, twisted in ways the human body **wasn't meant to twist**—

The only thing left was the **banana peel.**

Perfect.

Untouched.

As if it had **never been stepped on at all.**

The following morning.

Zoe walked into campus, still half-hungover, still smelling faintly of Cuban cigars and sin, still processing the absurdity of her life.

And—

There was a line.

An actual, physical line of people waiting for her.

Guys. Girls. People she barely knew.

Some were smiling nervously, others practically sweating with eagerness.

"Zoe, need me to carry your bags?"

"Zoe, I took notes for the classes you missed!"

"Zoe, I can wax your car if you want!"

(*She didn't even own a car. She took the bus.*)

She blinked.

Felt the sudden **weight of attention, of whispers, of something shifting in the air.**

Because **Kyle and Pato weren't at school today.**

And **everybody knew.**

But—**nobody said a word.**

Instead—**they looked at her.**

Like she was **someone to be respected.**

Or feared.

Or—**both.**

And Zoe?

She had **no idea what the fuck was going on.**

Loris **walked in**, smooth as ever, stepping through the crowd like he was **born to own space.**

Without a word, without a pause, he **kissed Zoe softly.**

Not **too openly**, not **too possessively**—just enough to **remind her and everyone else exactly where she stood.**

Exactly **who she belonged to.**

He was wearing a **double-breasted morning-colored suit**, the **kind nobody else in 2025 could pull off without looking like a lost time traveler.**

His **shirt?** Striped.

His **tie?** Perfect.

And then—

Just as casually, just as **recklessly defiant**, he took out his **platinum cigarette case**—

Right under the NO SMOKING sign.

Zoe **watched. Everyone watched.**

The click of the case.

The slow pull of a cigarette.

And then—

The lighter.

Not just any lighter.

A **real diamond lighter.**

A **diamond.**

She saw it. The way it **caught the light**, the way it **existed purely to be excessive, absurd, unreasonably Loris.**

He lit his cigarette. Took a slow drag.

Then—**offered the case around.**

Nobody **accepted.**

Not because they didn't **want to.**

But because—**who the fuck was going to take a cigarette from him, right there, right now, in the middle of whatever this was?**

Loris smirked, exhaled **smoothly**, and said nothing.

Because he **didn't have to.**

Loris exhaled a **slow, steady stream of smoke**, watching her through it like a man who already knew the answer to his question.

"You all right, Zoe?"

Zoe **blinked.**

Looked around.

At the **line of students suddenly treating her like a queenpin.**

At the **air of quiet, unspoken respect—maybe fear—now orbiting around her.**

At **Loris, standing there in his double-breasted suit, under a NO SMOKING sign, holding a cigarette lit with an actual fucking diamond.**

At **her own body**, still feeling the aftershocks of everything he had done to her.

At the **fact that Kyle and Pato were gone.**

At the **fact that people knew, but nobody said anything.**

She wasn't sure if she felt **powerful or terrified.**

Or both.

So she **took a breath**, steadied herself, and answered—

"Yeah, I'm all right."

Then, eyeing him, still unreadable, still untouchable, she added, low and sharp—

"For now."

Loris just **smirked.**

"Only for now, love?" Loris asked, his smirk lingering like the last drag of his cigarette.

Then, just as easily as he **commanded a room**, he turned and started walking—

Straight to the faculty dean.

With **her.**

Zoe, still **piecing together the absolute fever dream that was her life**, followed.

And they **didn't talk about anything serious.**

Not about **Kyle.**

Not about **Pato.**

Not about how the **entire university was suddenly too afraid—or too wise—to cross her.**

They talked about **the semester.**

Professors.

Random fun things.

As if this was **completely normal.**

As if Loris belonged in this world as effortlessly as he did in smoky bars and leather cigar lounges.

Then—the moment that rewrote reality.

Loris casually took out his checkbook.

Wrote a figure so large it could finance a whole new building.

And—without even blinking—

Slid it across the table to the dean.

Smiled.

Like he was just tipping a waiter for exceptional service.

Zoe didn't ask what the check was for.

She didn't need to.

Because—next semester, she graduated.

Top grades.

No questions.

No struggles.

No **obstacles** in her way.

And she couldn't decide if she was **grateful or absolutely terrified.**

At the **graduation ceremony**, Loris sat in the **front row**, because of course he did.

And not **alone.**

To his **right—Kyle's family.**

To his **left—Pato's family.**

Dressed **impeccably**, sitting **perfectly composed**, like they were honored guests at a **wedding, not a university ceremony.**

Zoe **spotted him instantly**—

Not just because of **who he was** but because of **who he had brought.**

She **walked up to him**, cap, gown, diploma in hand—

And **kissed him.**

Because, after **everything**, what else was there to do?

And as they kissed—

The **father of each family stood up.**

One from the **right.**

One from the **left.**

And, in **perfect sync**, as if this was a **rehearsed ritual**, they each took **Zoe's hand**—

And **kissed it.**

A **gesture of reverence.**

Of **respect.**

Of **undeniable acknowledgment.**

Loris watched.

And—**he approved.**

Zoe's family loved Loris.

How could they not?

He was polite, charming, well-mannered, and, most importantly—filthy rich.

Her father, in particular, was smitten.

Loris dressed in a way that made her dad's best Sunday suit look like something pulled from a clearance bin.

Every time Loris walked in, wearing his double-breasted elegance, perfectly pressed morning colors, and subtle but undeniably expensive cologne—

Her father's mouth watered.

Not in envy—no, in awe.

As if he had finally met the kind of man he wished he had been.

As if **Loris was a living, breathing example of the life he had dreamed of but never quite reached.**

And her **mother?**

She adored him too.

Because Loris was **always prepared.**

Flowers.

Expensive flowers.

Chocolates.

Imported, rare, wrapped in gold foil chocolates.

Little **gifts** that made her mother **light up**, that made her say things like,

"Oh, Lorenzo, you really shouldn't have!"

But also **never really meant it.**

Zoe, watching all of this, had only one thought:

"Oh, fuck. I'm never getting rid of him now."

As Zoe was **still thinking it**, still **processing the absolute inevitability of Loris in her life**, he—**of course—said it out loud.**

"Let's live together at my place."

Just **like that.**

Like it was the most **logical**, **unavoidable** next step.

Like she had **already agreed** without realizing it.

But he wasn't done.

Turning to her **father**, ever the **perfect, well-mannered gentleman in the suit that made lesser men question their wardrobe choices**, he added—

"People don't marry anymore these days, do they?

A rhetorical pause. A **calculated smirk.**

"I will spoil your princess. And you, sir, help off my whiskey stash."

Her father's eyes practically glowed.

His hand was already half-extended toward Loris, ready to shake on it, before Zoe could even open her mouth.

Her mother sighed dreamily over another box of imported chocolates.

And Zoe?

Zoe sat there, staring at the scene unfolding around her, thinking:

"This man just negotiated my life like a goddamn business deal. And I think he won."

That night, Loris **insisted** on watching *The Godfather Part I* with her.

Because **of course** he did.

Because **of course** a man who **walked through life like a noir film protagonist**, who **lit cigarettes under NO SMOKING signs**, who **paid off university bullies like a mob boss settling debts**—

Would **force her to sit through three hours of cinematic masculinity.**

She **rolled her eyes** but let it happen.

Because **Loris always got what he wanted.**

They **watched.**

The **weddings, the killings, the betrayals, the business.**

Then—the moment.

The *moment.*

Michael Corleone, now fully transformed, having his hand kissed by loyal mafiosi.

Kay, his wife, standing there, watching the truth settle in.

The door closing on her face.

Sealing her outside his world.

Loris, sipping his whiskey, watching the scene unfold, exhaled and said, softly but firmly:

"That will never be us."

And Zoe—

Zoe didn't know why those words stuck.

Didn't know why she suddenly felt the need to question them.

Because—

Why should it be in the first place?

Why was there even a comparison?

Why did it feel like he was **trying to rewrite a script she never knew they were following?**

She stared at him, at the **man who had already altered the entire course of her life**, and thought:

What the hell am I even part of?

Next day.

Lunch.

(Three-martini lunch. Because of course. Because she was getting used to downing petrol like it was part of her new, absurd reality.)

Somewhere between martini one and martini two, she tilted her head, looked straight at Loris, and, with the smoothness of someone already halfway to reckless, said:

"My dear love"

(A pause. A dramatic sip. A slow exhale.)

"(Because I love you so much, believe me before I tell you so—)"

She leaned in slightly, voice dropping just enough to sound dangerous.

"Why should a mafia movie ending… WORRY ME NOT BECAUSE THAT WILL NEVER BE US?"

Then—

She **froze.**

Realizing.

That she had just **screamed** the last part in the middle of the restaurant.

Silence.

People turned.

Zoe **covered her face, groaning.**

"Sorry for screaming."

Then—

The **waiter**, appearing like a man **born for this moment**, beaming with **absolute pride**, simply nodded and declared:

"My girl."

Loris, completely **unfazed**, as if this entire chaotic conversation was simply **another**

Tuesday, leaned back in his chair, took a measured sip of his martini, and stated:

"Because never us will it be."

A fact. A law of nature.

Like saying water is wet, the sky is blue, and Zoe Carter now casually drinks gasoline at lunch.

Then—he turned to the waiter, who was still standing there, still proud, still radiating 'my girl' energy, and sighed.

"Chris, come on. You used to be on my side."

Zoe snapped her attention back to the waiter.

Chris?

Her brain stalled.

Who the fuck was named Chris anymore?

Not Christopher, not Christian, not Kris-with-a-K, not even some trendy Gen Z reinvention like Xris.

Just… Chris?

She took another big sip of martini, staring at the man in his pressed waiter uniform, wondering if this entire world she had stepped into was a lost relic of a different timeline.

Because really—who the hell was named Chris anymore?

"I think I really need to meet your family."

Zoe said it calmly. Rationally. Like it was just another step in their absurd, high-speed, martini-fueled reality.

Loris shook his head.

A firm, absolute, do-not-pass-go, do-not-collect-$200 kind of shake.

"No."

Chris the waiter—also no.

The whole restaurant—

People who weren't even part of the conversation—heads shaking, glasses pausing mid-sip, forks suspended in air.

"No."

Then—

From somewhere outside the known universe, Dan Castellaneta, the voice of Homer Simpson himself, materialized in spirit and muttered:

"D'oh!"

And if that wasn't enough of a sign—

A tenor somewhere in Spain, a man who had no idea he was spiritually connected to this moment, dramatically pitched a D-minor "Noooooooo!"

Zoe just blinked.

Took another martini sip.

Then muttered, more to herself than anyone else:

"Well, that's not suspicious at all."

And before Loris could even summon him, before he could even attempt to control fate—

Zio appeared.

Out of thin air.

Like a force of nature, of inevitability, of history itself unfolding.

He was there.

Standing by their table, as if he had always been there, as if he had been waiting for this exact moment to materialize.

"Zoe," he said, voice rich, heavy with something she couldn't place yet.

His **eyes studied her**, slow, deliberate, like a man who had seen **the world and all its lies, and was deciding if she was one of them.**

Then—**a smile.**

"Non sapevo di poter essere così fortunato."

(*I didn't know I could be so lucky.*)

Then, with an elegant, effortless **wave of his hand,** he added:

"Chiamami Zio, per favore."

(*Call me Zio, please.*)

Zoe—who had **not been prepared for this, for the weight of this meeting, for the sheer, inescapable gravity of the moment—**

Did not hesitate.

She **kissed him on both cheeks.**

Like she had **always known him.**

Like this was **not just an introduction but a confirmation.**

And then, softly, but with **undeniable certainty**, she said:

"Zio."

With **love. With respect. With something she didn't fully understand but somehow knew was important.**

And that—

That sealed her destiny.

Waiter, proud:

"My girl."

Because of course.

Because Chris the waiter had **somehow become the unofficial narrator of Zoe's descent into this world.**

Because Chris, in his own way, had **seen it before anyone else had.**

And then—

Chris the waiter was later privately wacked by picciotti.

No big headlines.

No public spectacle.

Just—**gone.**

Like he had **never existed.**

The restaurant continued **as usual.**

The martinis were **still poured.**

The cigars **still smoked.**

The world **moved on.**

And Zoe—**whether she realized it or not—**

Had moved with it.

"Vieni a casa, amore santo. Mia moglie sta facendo il sugo."

(*Come home, holy love. My wife is making the sauce.*)

Zoe understood perfectly.

Every single word.

Without effort.

Without that little mental translation delay.

Just—understood.

She blinked.

Her brain stumbled.

Wait.

Why am I understanding Italian now?

Not just picking out words, not piecing together meaning from vague familiarity—

She had **understood it like it was her first language.**

Like she had **always spoken it.**

Like it had been **waiting inside her, dormant, ready to surface.**

She looked at **Zio.**

At **Loris.**

At the world she had somehow **stepped into.**

And suddenly, she had a **terrifying realization.**

She wasn't just **with Loris.**

She wasn't just **falling into his orbit.**

She was **becoming part of it.**

Loris **took her hand.**

No words.

No explanations.

Just a **gentle squeeze.**

A small, silent gesture.

But it **said everything.**

You are not alone in this madness.

I am your life buoy.

The world was **shifting around her.**

Reality was **warping, twisting, folding her into something new, something inevitable.**

And yet—

With **that one touch, that one squeeze, that one unshakable presence beside her—**

She loved him a little more.

To get to **Mamma's sugo simmering pot**, they passed through **three levels of guards.**

Because of **course they did.**

This wasn't just **Sunday lunch.**

This was **entering a different reality.**

Picciotti.

The **young ones. The eager ones. The ones who had to prove themselves.**

Associati.

The **trusted ones. The ones who were almost inside, but not quite.**

Soldati.

The **real ones. The made ones. The ones who didn't need to prove anything because their very existence had already been carved into the world.**

And every single one of them—**every single one—**

Took their hats off as **Zio walked by.**

Because—**of course.**

Because in **this world, in this house, in this kingdom hidden inside 2025,**

Everybody **wore Borsalinos.**

Even now.

Even in a time of **phones and electric cars and AI algorithms.**

Here—**the hat was still law.**

And Zoe—

Zoe **walked through them all**, past the **hushed nods, the quiet deference, the barely contained power in the air.**

And in the silence of her own mind, as she felt the weight of this place settle around her, she thought:

Why… why do I know these things now?

As soon as **Mamma saw her**, she **left the sugo.**

No hesitation.

No question.

She **wiped her hands on her apron**—

And **hugged Zoe.**

A **real** hug. A **deep** hug. The kind that **erased time, erased uncertainty, erased everything except warmth.**

She smelled like **flour.**

Like **onion.**

Like **tomato, simmering slowly in a pot that had probably existed before Zoe was even born.**

Like **pure motherness.**

And **Mamma hugged her like the daughter she had always had.**

Not the daughter she was **meeting for the first time.**

Not the daughter she was **welcoming as a stranger.**

The **daughter who had always been meant to come home.**

And Zoe, standing there, breathing in that warmth, that impossible, overwhelming sense of **belonging to something she didn't even understand yet**—

Felt something **break** inside her.

Something that made her think—

Oh no.

Because now—

Now she was really in.

"Mamma," Zoe whispered.

And the moment the word left her lips, something shifted.

Something sealed.

Because Mamma heard it.

Felt it.

Understood it.

She kissed Zoe on both cheeks, the way a mother does when she has no doubts left.

Then, without hesitation, she hugged her tighter.

Tighter than before.

Tighter than Zoe had ever been hugged in her entire life.

Not like a welcome.

Not like a **formality.**

But like a **claim.**

Like an **acceptance so absolute that it left no room for negotiation.**

Like she had always been **Mamma's daughter.**

And now—

Now she finally **came home.**

"Brindiamo!" said **Zio**, his voice full, commanding, the kind of voice that **expected no objections.**

And—**of course.**

A **bottle appeared.**

From **where?**

Zoe **didn't know.**

Zio could have **materialized it from thin air for all she knew at this point.**

Then—**the glasses.**

Very **tiny** glasses.

Suspiciously **tiny** glasses.

Which meant—

Oh no.

Oh, holy kale and quinoa, no.

Zio smiled.

"Grappa."

Of course.

Of course.

Zoe stared at the **clear liquid**, already **feeling her throat burn in anticipation.**

Because **of course** they weren't toasting with **wine, prosecco, something celebratory and festive.**

No.

They were toasting with **rocket fuel.**

She **exhaled.**

She was **in this now.**

No backing out.

So she lifted her **tiny glass of pure fire**, clinked it against Loris', against Zio's, against Mamma's—

And prepared to **burn.**

"Cent'anni," said **Zio**, raising his glass with the weight of **tradition, family, and a silent promise of power.**

"E uno," Loris added, because of course **he had to have the last word, even in a toast that was older than time itself.**

Zoe, holding her **tiny glass of impending doom**, suddenly felt **pressure.**

A moment.

A silence.

A weight in the air.

She figured—**she should say something.**

Something **Italian.**

Something that would **solidify her presence, her place, her belonging.**

And so—

With absolute, reckless confidence—

She raised her glass and declared:

"Bruschetta."

Silence.

Mamma **blinked.**

Zio **paused mid-sip.**

Loris—**Loris**—set his glass down **very slowly**, as if trying to process what just happened.

Then—**he laughed.**

Not a chuckle.

Not a smirk.

A **real, deep, uncontrollable laugh.**

Zoe felt **her soul exit her body.**

Zio finally nodded, as if **accepting her absurdity as part of the family package.**

Mamma, bless her **motherly patience**, patted Zoe's hand.

And Loris, **wiping a tear from his eye, still grinning**, raised his glass again and said:

"To bruschetta, then."

They drank.

And—**holy mother of all that is vegan-friendly—**

Zoe **burned.**

Zoe, still recovering from the first grappa-induced near-death experience, stared at the two people in front of her.

Zio.
(Which meant uncle.)

Mamma.
(Which meant mother.)

Her brain stalled.

Her hangover mixed with the grappa.

Her sense of logic tried to piece together the family tree, failed, and rage-quit.

"So… he's Zio… but his wife is Mamma…"

Her eyes narrowed.

Her soul sighed.

"Oh, fuck it."

She grabbed the bottle.

Filled her tiny grappa glass to the brim.

"I need more truck petrol."

And—before anyone could stop her, before she could rethink life choices—

She gulped it down.

Full send.

No hesitation.

The fire spread instantly, scorching her throat, her stomach, her entire existence.

She felt her lungs evacuate.

Her brain shut down.

Her soul temporarily leave her body to check on other dimensions where this family structure made sense.

Loris just watched, shaking his head, deeply, profoundly entertained.

Zio nodded, respectfully approving of her resilience.

Mamma patted her hand again, this time with just a touch of pity.

And Zoe, barely hanging onto reality, just stared at the empty glass and whispered:

"Holy avocado toast, I think I saw God."

They sat at the table.

Zio poured the wine.

(Thank quinoa. Finally, something she could actually drink without questioning her entire existence.)

Mamma moved effortlessly through the kitchen, her presence commanding, nurturing, absolute.

The spaghetti was ready.

She poured over the sugo, rich, thick, simmered to perfection.

Then—she served.

Zoe first.

(*The guest. The honored one.*)

Then Zio.

(*Capofamiglia. The head of the house. The man who, with a single nod, could probably rewrite history.*)

Then Loris.

(*Who, in his own way, was just as inevitable as Zio.*)

Then, finally, herself.

Zoe stared at the plate.

This was it.

The test.

She picked up her fork.

And—no spoon.

No one was using a spoon.

There were **no spoons by any plate.**

Her **brain screamed.**

Because **all her life**, whenever she had spaghetti, she had **always used a spoon to help twirl.**

But **not here.**

Not in **Mamma's house.**

So—**she gave it her best.**

Fork in. Twirl. **Fumble.** Twirl again. **Messy.** One strand slipped, then another.

Her **confidence wavered.**

She lifted the fork, a **sloppy, tangled nest of pasta**, and prayed to **whatever deity protected lost vegan girls in Italian mob families.**

And as she put the pasta in her mouth—

Holy quinoa.

This was **the taste of heaven.**

The sauce was **rich, deep, balanced, layered in ways she couldn't even comprehend.**

The pasta was **perfectly al dente**, catching the sugo in ways that made her **want to cry.**

She **chewed, swallowed, closed her eyes.**

And for a moment—

For just **one moment—**

She **forgot everything.**

Forgot **Kyle.**

Forgot **Pato.**

Forgot that she was **not supposed to be here, not supposed to belong, not supposed to understand Italian, not supposed to drink grappa like a war survivor.**

Because **this—this was home.**

And when she **opened her eyes, blinking back the overwhelming flood of sensation,** she found Loris watching her.

Smirking.

Because of **course he was.**

She took **another forkful.**

And—

Saint Peter himself opened the pearly gates of her taste buds.

The flavors **wrapped around her soul, baptized her in the holy church of sugo, absolved her of every kale smoothie and quinoa bowl she had ever consumed.**

Her **eyes watered.**

Not from **spice.**

Not from **grappa.**

But from **pure, unfiltered emotion.**

She looked at **Mamma**, this woman who had **accepted her without hesitation, without question, without explanation.**

And—without thinking, without hesitation, without even realizing it—

She whispered, voice full of **genuine gratitude**:

"Grazie, Mamma."

What?

What?

Zoe **blinked.**

Did she just—**did she just speak Italian?**

Not **forced.**

Not **translated in her head first.**

Just—**spoke it? Naturally? Like it belonged to her?**

Mamma **smiled.**

Zio **nodded approvingly.**

Loris, that **smug, impossible man,** simply sipped his wine and said,

"You're in it now, amore mio."

And Zoe?

She **was.**

God help her, she **was.**

Zoe **drank a lot of vino.**

Because of **course she did.**

It was **red, deep, smooth**, tasting like **history and secrets and centuries of people who knew how to live.**

And—**before her glass ever went empty—**

Zio refilled it.

Every. Single. Time.

Silently. **Effortlessly.** With the kind of **pride** that said, **"This girl is becoming Italiana."**

She **noticed it.**

Noticed how he **never let her cup stay empty,** how he watched her with a **quiet kind of approval**, as if she were **passing a test she hadn't even realized she was taking.**

And Loris?

Loris was **watching, smirking, sipping his own wine like he had already known this would happen.**

Like he had already known that **one day, not long from now, Zoe Carter wouldn't just be Zoe Carter anymore.**

She'd be something **more.**

Something **deeper.**

Something that didn't just **belong to Loris.**

But to all of them.

And as the vino warmed her, as the spaghetti settled, as Mamma fussed over her plate and Zio nodded like a king approving a knight—

Zoe had only one thought.

"Holy fuck, I think I just got adopted by the mafia."

After dinner, they watched TV.

Zoe sat on the sofa, wrapped in Loris' arms, warm, full, just slightly drunk on vino and something deeper.

Mamma was in her armchair, knitting, her presence as steady and eternal as the simmering pot of sugo still cooling in the kitchen.

Zio sat in the other armchair, eating an orange, peeling it slowly, methodically, as if he had all the time in the world.

A cat—where did the cat even come from?—curled in his lap, purring softly.

And—

Zoe blinked.

Why did this feel so familiar?

So structured?

So… cinematic?

Her eyes flicked to **Loris.**

To Mamma.

To Zio.

To the way the **room was arranged, the warmth, the quiet, the unspoken power of the family gathered together.**

And then—**it hit her.**

This was *The Godfather.*

Not the **violence.**

Not the **whispers of war and power.**

But the **other part.**

The **family part.**

The part where **everything is exactly as it should be, where the outside world doesn't exist, where time itself bows to tradition.**

But then—**the movie began.**

Not *The Godfather.*

Something **old, something black and white, something purely, quintessentially Italian.**

A man appeared on screen—**a face unlike any she had seen before.**

Totò, the head titles said.

She didn't **know him.**

Didn't **know that he was *Il Principe della Risata,* the undisputed king of Italian comedy, a monument to theater itself.**

She just—**laughed.**

Heartily. Sincerely.

Not because she was **trying to fit in.**

Not because she was **playing along.**

Because **he was actually, ridiculously, unbelievably funny.**

His **body moved like a marionette**, twisting, bending, exaggerating in ways that felt **impossible.**

She laughed **until her stomach hurt, until she wiped tears, until she had forgotten completely where she was.**

And then—**she looked around.**

Zio was **smiling.**

Mamma had **paused her knitting, watching her with the softest, warmest expression of quiet approval.**

And Loris?

Loris was **watching her.**

Not the movie.

Not Totò.

Her.

Because in that moment—

In the pure, unfiltered **joy of her laughter—**

She had become **one of them.**

Then, **Loris took her hand.**

His **fingers curled around hers**, slow, deliberate.

His **eyes dark**, that same **lazy, knowing look** that always meant she was about to **lose herself completely.**

"Come to bed," he said.

Zoe blinked. **"But I'm not tired."**

He leaned in, lips brushing the **shell of her ear**, voice low, deep, pure sin—

"I will fuck you."

Her breath **hitched.**

Her pulse **jumped.**

Her **entire body recalibrated.**

"I am suddenly tired."

Loris **smirked.**

She turned, **kissed Mamma on the cheek, then Zio.**

Zio, still **peeling his orange**, gave her a **knowing nod**, as if this was all part of the natural order of things.

And then—

She went **upstairs.**

To his room.

To **their room.**

She couldn't **scream** in this house.

Not here. Not with **Mamma downstairs, knitting.** Not with **Zio finishing his orange like a man who had already seen and known too much.**

But Loris—**Loris always made her scream.**

Not **moan.**

Not **gasp.**

Scream.

Like a **beast in agony, in pleasure, in absolute surrender.**

So—

Before he could **begin, before she lost the last shred of self-control she had left,**

She took his **leather belt.**

Bit into it.

And let him **work his magic.**

By morning, Zoe **stared at the belt in her hand**—or what was left of it.

It was **snipped clean through** by her teeth.

The **evidence of the night's chaos**, of Loris' magic, of her complete and utter **surrender.**

Loris, already **dressed impeccably**, raised an eyebrow at the belt, smirked, and said:

"You owe me a new one."

She didn't even **have the energy to retort.**

They went **downstairs** for breakfast.

And it was like **stepping into another world.**

Mamma was in the kitchen, her **apron tied perfectly, moving with the quiet grace of someone who had perfected this ritual over decades.**

The smell of **coffee brewing in a moka** filled the air, rich and deep and **purely Italian.**

On the counter, cooling on a rack, was a **torta margherita**, its soft, golden surface dusted lightly with **powdered sugar.**

Zio was already seated at the table, in a **three-piece suit, crisp and unshakable,** sipping **grappa like it was water.**

The **cat was on his lap**, purring as he absentmindedly stroked its head.

Zoe **paused.**

She blinked.

This was **normal here.**

The smell of **freshly baked cake. The moka bubbling. Zio in his suit with his morning grappa, the cat purring like it ruled the house.**

This was **the world she had been pulled into.**

And—**strangely, impossibly—**

It felt like **home.**

Zoe kissed **Mamma** on the cheek, then **Zio**, who nodded with quiet approval, as if this simple gesture was another **step deeper into the family.**

She had her **torta margherita**, its light sweetness **melting on her tongue**, and sipped her **caffè**, the moka-brewed richness jolting her into full awareness of the day ahead.

Then, as she set her cup down, Zio spoke.

"Zoe, amore, facciamo una passeggiata."

(*Zoe, my love, let's take a walk.*)

He rose from the table, smooth, unhurried, his suit perfectly in place, the air around him commanding a **silent respect.**

Zoe followed him out, through the streets of the **neighborhood.**

And **everywhere they went—**

People **took off their hats.**

Bowed their heads.

Street vendors approached with delicacies—fresh bread, cheeses, fruits—and Zio accepted them, handing them to Zoe like an uncle spoiling his beloved niece.

She took the offerings, still trying to process the quiet deference, the way people murmured Zio's name with awe and gratitude.

Then—

The mothers.

They came forward, holding up their babies, small bundles swaddled tightly, looking to Zio with hopeful eyes.

And he—effortlessly, like it was the most natural thing in the world—

Kissed each baby's forehead.

Blessed them.

And every time, the **mothers beamed, whispered thank-yous, stepped back as if they had just been graced by something sacred.**

Zoe **walked beside him**, taking it all in.

The **deference. The respect. The reverence.**

And suddenly—**she understood.**

This wasn't just a **walk.**

This wasn't just a **family outing.**

Zio was **showing her off.**

He was **introducing her.**

Not as a **guest. Not as an outsider.**

But as a **parente dello Zio.**

(**A relative of Zio.**)

And in that moment—**she felt it.**

The weight of what that meant.

The world she was now **part of.**

Zio **walked her into a jewelry store.**

Not **any** jewelry store.

One of those places that didn't **need signs.** That didn't have **price tags** on display.

Where the **door was opened from the inside**, not by a sensor.

Where the man behind the counter—**an older gentleman in a perfectly tailored suit, with white gloves and a knowing smile—**

Didn't ask **what they wanted.**

Because **he already knew.**

Zio simply **tilted his head**, and within moments, a **black velvet tray was laid out.**

Diamonds.

Platinum.

Weight.

Legacy.

Zoe **stared.**

Still trying to **piece together what was happening.**

But Zio, ever the **patient force of nature**, simply picked a **ring.**

A **platinum ring.**

With a **diamond the size of a peanut.**

And before she could **protest, question, or even fully comprehend—**

It was **on her finger.**

She **looked at it.**

The weight. The shimmer. The **absolute absurdity of it.**

Zio nodded, **pleased.**

And just like that—**they walked out.**

But as they continued their **passeggiata**, something **shifted.**

Because now—

People came forward.

Not just **to bow.**

Not just **to greet Zio.**

But to **kiss her ring.**

One after another.

Like a **ritual.**

Like a **statement.**

Like an **acknowledgment that she was no longer just Zoe Carter.**

And every time, Zio **nodded, approving.**

Like this was **exactly how it should be.**

Like she had **always been meant to wear it.**

And Zoe?

Zoe just **stared at the ring** and thought—

What the actual fuck did I just become?

The following day.

Loris' apartment.

Zoe sat, cross-legged, on his—no, their—leather sofa.

A martini in hand.

Sipping rocket fuel like a seasoned pro.

She wasn't even wincing anymore.

She had crossed that threshold, adapted, evolved.

Now, she enjoyed it.

The sharp burn. The perfect chill. The way it settled into her bloodstream like it had always belonged there.

Across from her, Loris.

Watching her with that steady, knowing gaze.

The kind that **undressed her without moving, that unraveled her without a touch.**

And she—

She was **lost in him.**

Didn't even notice the **picciotti** moving her **boxes in.**

One after another.

Like it was the most **normal thing in the world.**

Like it had already been **decided for her, long before she ever stepped through that velvet curtain at the club.**

She sipped her martini, eyes locked on **Loris**, and thought:

Well. I guess I live here now.

Still **locked in Loris' gaze**, still **sipping her martini like she had been drinking gasoline her whole life**, Zoe **raised a hand.**

Between her **fingers—**a grand bill.

Effortless.

Casual.

Like she had done this a hundred times before.

"For your trouble, boys."

She never took her eyes off Loris.

Never broke the spell between them.

And the picciotti—

They bowed.

Almost to the ground.

Took the money with reverence.

Then—still bowing, still backing away, still holding onto the weight of the moment—

They walked backward out of the room.

Still bowing.

And then—

They **closed the door behind them.**

Sealing her **inside.**

Inside **this life.**

Inside **this world.**

Inside **whatever the fuck she had become.**

And she—

She just **took another sip** of her martini.

Because at this point,

What else was there to do?

She **laid down** her martini.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

Not **breaking eye contact.**

Then—**voice low, raw, demanding:**

"Fuck me now, maledetto bastardo."

And—

The maledetto bastardo did.

Hard.

Like he had been waiting for those exact words.

Like she had sealed her own fate the moment she spoke them.

Like she was his, fully, completely, no way back.

And Zoe—

She didn't want a way back.

As Loris trembled on the edge of his petite mort, caught in that final, shuddering moment of surrender, Zoe took control.

She reached for his baton de l'amour, claiming it with her petite bouche, taking him in completely.

Sucking.

Drinking.

Swallowing every last drop of his jus d'amour.

Loris shuddered, shook, nearly lost himself completely.

She looked up at him, eyes glowing with power, with certainty, with something he had never seen in any woman before.

As he was still recovering, still breathing heavily, still reeling from what she had just done to him—

She cupped his balls.

Softly. Possessively.

Smiled.

And—in that final, unshakable declaration of fate, of dominance, of absolute certainty—

She whispered:

"It will always be like this from now on, amore mio."

And in that moment—Loris knew.

He was done for.

Forever.

Ten years later.

Zoe Carter.

College professor.

Respected. **Feared.**

A woman who **never failed a student**—because **she never actually graded anything.**

She just **wrote numbers randomly.**

But **always above passing.**

Because, **really—who cared?**

Her assistant? A **picciotto.**

Because of **course.**

The university **didn't pay for assistants.**

But Loris **did.**

And so, her **"assistant"** carried books.

Carried **registers.**

Carried papers that no one ever read.

One day, he reached for the grades paper.

Zoe—without looking up, without pausing her espresso, without so much as a blink—

"Leave the grades," she said, voice smooth, effortless.

Then—tilting her head just slightly, eyes finally flicking up to him—

"Take the cannoli."

The picciotto nodded.

Took the cannoli.

And walked out, without another word.

Because orders were orders.

Loris had white threads in his hair now.

Just a few.

Just enough to make him look even **more devastating, more timeless, more powerful.**

Somehow, the **passing years had only refined him**, sharpened his edges while keeping the **smirk, the confidence, the presence.**

And Zoe?

Zoe **hadn't aged a day.**

Not a **single line.**

Not a **single wrinkle.**

As if she had been **preserved in time, untouched by reality.**

As if—

…

Wait.

…

What if?

A spell?

A deal?

A price paid in some invisible, unknowable way?

…

Oh, come on.

What was she even thinking?

This was life.

This was just how things were.

Right?

Loris leaned in.

Kissed her.

Took her arm.

And as they walked through the university halls—

The students.

The professors.

The dean.

All bowed.

Silently.

Respectfully.

Inevitably.

And Zoe, walking beside Loris, wearing her diamond ring, her ageless skin, her unshaken presence, thought:

Oh.

I don't just belong here.

I rule here.

The sex—like good wine, like aged whiskey, like the very fabric of their existence—

Had only gotten better.

Loris still made her scream like a beast in agony.

But now—

Now, he did too.

Because where he had once controlled her pleasure like a master conductor, like a stove gas knob, turning it up, up, up until she exploded—

She did the same to him now.

Matched him. Rivaled him.

Manipulated him.

Turned his body into something just as helpless under her hands as she was under his.

They were equals.

In passion.

In **destruction.**

In **need.**

They were—

Inseparable.

Faculty meeting.

The most **boring**, **soul-draining**, **mind-numbing** event **humanity had ever engineered.**

Zoe sat there, utterly **untouched by the mundane misery of academia**, dressed in a **perfectly tailored morning tailleur**, legs crossed, exuding the kind of **effortless dominance that made men forget how to breathe.**

A **martini in hand.**

Because of **course.**

Sexy **as a fawn**, yet **powerful as a puma in the mountains.**

She barely **pretended to listen**, only **half-aware of the meaningless bureaucratic drivel** surrounding her.

Then—

The **dean** turned to her.

Cleared his throat.

"Professor Carter, what do you think?"

Zoe, not even blinking, took one last slow, purposeful sip of her martini.

Then—delicately, lazily—

She set the glass down.

Ran her fingers across her diamond ring.

Then, voice smooth as velvet-wrapped steel, she said:

"Tell me why I should care."

The dean almost choked.

The room went silent.

All eyes turned.

And then—

The dean lowered his head.

Not in shame.

Not in **defeat.**

But in **recognition.**

"Sì, signora."

And just like that—**the discussion was over.**

Ten years more.

Zio had **aged.**

His once **unyielding presence**, the force of a man who had shaped **not just his world, but the very air around him**, had slowly **softened.**

His **movements slower.**

His **voice lower.**

His **grappa pours smaller.**

And then—**one morning.**

He simply **didn't wake up.**

Just **gone.**

Like a candle that had burned **steadily, powerfully, inevitably—**

Until there was simply **nothing left to burn.**

The **funeral was grand.**

A **monument.**

Because **how else do you say goodbye to a king?**

The **picciotti**, the **soldati**, the **associati**—they all came, all **bowed their heads**, all stood **silent, rigid, as the man who had ruled their world was lowered into the earth.**

Zoe—

Zoe **cried.**

Sincerely.

Deeply.

Her **soul breaking open.**

She **held onto Mamma**, arms wrapped **tightly**, **desperately**, because the woman beside her was now **the only thing left of the unshakable force that had brought her into this world.**

She **didn't care who saw.**

Didn't care that she was supposed to be **strong, untouchable, cold as the diamond still sitting on her finger.**

Because **this**—

This **was loss.**

And for the first time in decades—

She felt it.

Later, in Zio's study.

The room was quiet. Heavy. Different.

Zoe stood outside the door, watching.

Watching Loris.

He stood there, blazer off, sleeves rolled up, his shirt held in place by suspenders, looking both effortless and inevitable.

Powerful.

Unquestioned.

The men approached.

One by one.

And they kissed his hands.

Because now—

Now, there was only one man to bow to.

Zoe watched from the doorway.

Watched as **the world shifted, as the air itself recognized what had just happened.**

Loris looked up.

Saw her.

And—**without hesitation, without words—**

Extended his hand.

Calling her.

Zoe **walked in.**

Took his hand.

He **pulled her close.**

Kissed her.

Squeezed her ass.

Because—**of course.**

And then—

The men turned to her.

They **bowed.**

And—**one by one—**

They **kissed her diamond ring.**

Zoe **watched them do it.**

Felt the weight of it.

The meaning of it.

This was no **courtesy.**

No **formality.**

This was a **recognition.**

And—**for the first time ever—**

She **approved herself.**

Many years later.

Zoe sat in a leather armchair.

A tiny glass of grappa in hand.

A cat on her lap.

Her hair slightly clearer, a few strands of silver catching the dim light.

Barely a few lines on her face.

Apart from that—not aged a day.

She looked into the camera.

A long, slow stare.

Then—her monologue.

"Do you know what Mafia is?"

A pause.

She ran her fingers through the cat's fur.

Took a breath.

"It is a chicken."

She let that sit. Let the words hang.

Then—she continued.

"Someone steals your chicken. You go to the police. They register your case, do nothing about it.

You go to the padrino.

The next day, you have a chicken back in your yard.

Not the same, but still a chicken."

She swirled her grappa.

Watched the liquid catch the light.

"But now, you owe."

She let that settle.

Took a slow, deliberate sip.

Then—the final part.

"Many months later, a rainy night, knock on your door.

On it, a picciotto, with a man covered in blood."

She lifted the glass slightly.

"Picciotto says—

'If anybody asks, this man slept here tonight.'"

Silence.

She took another sip of grappa.

Looked into the camera one last time.

And—with a knowing smile, a final, quiet statement—

"See? A chicken."

Cut to black.

Silence.

Then—the sounds.

A man being wacked.

A thud. A struggle. A final breath.

Then—

A chicken.

Coo-cook.

Soft. Inevitable.

Then—

A different sound.

Loris' fingers.

Inside Zoe.

Like a stone in a pond.

Wet.

Then—

Watery sounds.

The **rhythm.**

The **build.**

Then—

The **scream.**

A **wild beast in agony.**

Raw. **Unfiltered.**

Then—**voices.**

Loris: "Amore mio."

Zoe: "Amore mio."

Then—

Music.

Mina.

"Amor Mio."

The song swells.

Credits roll.

IN A WORLD OF KALE SMOOTHIES AND CONSENT FORMS, ONE WOMAN FOUND HERSELF FUCKED—LITERALLY—BY HISTORY.

Zoe Carter is everything the 2020s raised her to be: vegan, feminist, environmentally woke, armed with a reusable water bottle and crippling anxiety. Lorenzo Velluti is none of that. A tuxedoed relic from a time when men smoked indoors, spanked asses unapologetically, and poured martinis before noon. He croons. He fucks. He destroys ideology with a raised eyebrow and a platinum cigarette case. She wanted a cucumber water. He gave her jazz, raw meat, and twelve orgasms. From the sticky neon hell of Club Eden to a mahogany jazz bar untouched by time, Zoe falls headfirst into a warped, hypersexual universe where feminism meets its match—and likes it. In this explosive collision of eras, ethics, and erogenous zones, nothing is sacred except the martini count (never under three), the steaks (always rare), and the feelings (deeply repressed until screamed mid-orgasm). Part absurdist satire, part erotic fever dream, and fully deranged, this is the novel your BookTok algorithm tried to warn you about. Somewhere between a feminist awakening and a full-body betrayal by her own pussy, Zoe Carter fell in love. God help us all. Warning: Contains explicit language, explicit fluids, and meat.